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**DISTRICT PROMOTION POLICIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:
EXAMINING PRINCIPAL INTERPRETATION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
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Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

DISTRICT PROMOTION POLICIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: EXAMINING PRINCIPAL INTERPRETATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

LaToya Exum Floyd
Old Dominion University, 2020
Director: Dr. Jay Scribner

The number of students receiving special education services have steadily increased in the United States over the past decade. Students with disabilities (SWD) historically score lower on high stakes tests, and they require considerations beyond academic achievement for promotion. The growing number of SWD and accountability measures included in district promotion policies has resulted in a wide range of principal interpretation of district promotion policies. A principal's interpretation of district promotion policies affects the district's high school graduation and dropout rates. Therefore, unclear promotion policies can lead to inconsistent interpretation; which can lead to greater retentions and dropouts for SWD and non-compliance with IDEA.

This study focuses on those SWD who are assessed by state standardized assessment programs, which comprises of 99% of the school district's SWD population. This group is not considered the 1% of the federally defined SWD population assessed by alternative assessments. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that contribute to the principal's interpretation of the school district's promotion policy for SWD. In addition to the factors, the study sought to understand how principals influenced their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the promotion policy for SWD, and how the policy was implemented.

The principal ensures that the school district's policies are interpreted based on their intent and purpose. Principals abide by broad vague district policies, but they must use their

discretion to interpret and implement the policy for their school. This study validates current research on policy implementation by street-level bureaucrats and considers implications of loose coupling organization theory. School districts can also use this study in understanding how to align district policy with school-level implementation.

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This Dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Taylor and Jaden Floyd. They were my driving force and motivation throughout this journey. I was not always physically available due to the long hours of research and writing; however, I was always spiritually and emotionally available. My daughters will always be the reason I persist through the difficult times. Taylor and Jaden are the best parts of me, and they are the reason I persevere.

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Dr. LaToya Exum-Floyd!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
 Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	3
PURPOSE	3
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	4
SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY	4
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS	5
ORGANIZATION OF STUDY	6
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	8
ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	8
History of Accountability Policies for Students	9
Students with Disabilities and Testing in an era of Accountability	16
DISTRICT POLICY	19
District Policy Implementation and Interpretation	20
Students with Disabilities in District Promotion Policy	23
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS	25
Loosely Coupled Organizations	25
Street-level Bureaucracy	28
Available Resources	30
Challenge to Authority	32
Vague Expectations	33
Street-level bureaucracy and Decision Making	35
III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	37
RESEARCH DESIGN	37
Case Selection	39
Participant Selection	41
DATA COLLECTION	42
DATA ANALYSIS	45
LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS	46
ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER	47
IV. FINDINGS	48
DISTRICT SETTING AND PROMOTION POLICY	49
School District's Elementary Promotion Policy	50

WITHIN-SCHOOL ANALYSIS	52
Westpoint Elementary	52
Oakbrook Elementary	62
Stonebridge Elementary	69
COMPARATIVE PRINCIPAL ANALYSIS	78
Knowledge as a Resource	78
Increased Power-Decreased Challenge to Authority	81
Accountability resolves Vague Expectations.....	83
The Dimension of Principal's Experience	86
CONCLUSION	90
 V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	91
OVERVIEW	91
SUMMARY OF SYUDY	91
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	93
The Principal's Interpretation of District Policy.....	94
Available Resources.....	94
Challenge to Authority.....	96
Vague Expectations	97
The Principal's Implementation of District Policy	98
CONCLUSIONS.....	100
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE	101
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	103
SUMMARY	104
 REFERENCES	105
 APPENDICES	118
A. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT.....	118
B. LETTER (EMAIL) TO PARTICIPANTS	121
C. CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOURE	122
D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	123
 VITA.....	127

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Participant Demographics	42
2. Westpoint Elementary Participants	53
3. Oakbrook Elementary Participants	63
4. Stonebridge Elementary Participants	71
5. School Participant (All Students) Retentions & Rationales 2015-2018	85
6. School Participant SWD Retentions & Rationales 2015-2018	86

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Tightly Coupled Organization Structure.....	26
2 Loosely Coupled Organization Structure.....	27
3 Ethics in Decision Making.....	36, 94
4 Policy Interpretation to Implementation	98
5 Organizational Policy Interpretation and Implementation.....	100

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, the United States education system has focused on student accountability. In 1990, President Clinton began a push to end social promotion. Social promotion is “the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards and academic standards to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing or satisfying the requirements” (Ysseldyke et al., 2004, p. 87). Instead of social promotion, a focus has been placed on promotion through standardized testing (Natriello & Heubert, 2002). This transformation resulted in school districts changing promotion policies to include some type of accountability assessment or “high stakes testing” along with other provisions, such as grades and attendance (Natriello & Heubert, 2002).

In recent years, federal legislation required all states to have student accountability standards linked to assessments (Yell, Katsiyannis, Collins, & Loskinski, 2012). High stakes testing fulfills the accountability mandate. However, the high stakes testing repercussions have trickled down into district promotion policies putting students with disabilities at a disadvantage (McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003). Many district promotion policies rely on high stakes testing, however, the policies cannot undermine the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

A student’s Individual Education Program (IEP) is written in accordance with federal/state guidelines and IDEA. Appropriate accommodations, modifications, and services for the student are determined by the IEP team based on the student’s disability. The student’s IEP guides their education (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000); and it determines participation in state and district assessments. Students can be assessed through state standardized tests or alternative assessment measures (VDOE, 2015) if they meet the criteria. Principals abide by the district’s

promotion policy, but they use their discretion, the student's IEP, and other data when interpreting vague promotion policies for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities (SWD) are one of the largest and most challenging subgroups to educate. These students have recognized deficits that create challenges for teachers as they plan and instruct. Teachers report a lack of instructional creativity and individualized instruction concerns (Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2007) when trying to keep pace with the curriculum. Appropriately educating SWD is challenging; therefore, they may have trouble accessing the curriculum and perform lower on assessments. In addition to the teacher's perception on educating SWD, the principal's beliefs about inclusion in the school setting contributes to their academic success (Praisner, 2003). SWD are at a greater risk for failure and retention because they have documented deficits that makes it difficult for them to access to the curriculum and participate in instruction.

Local school districts create promotion policy for a diverse population. All subgroups are considered when the promotion policy is developed; therefore, the intent or specific nuances of the policy are not always evident. Principals rely on their personal attitudes and the school's inherent value system to interpret and implement the policy (Marks & Nance, 2007). The organizational structure of the school district dictates the principal's autonomy within their school (DeRoche, 2013), and principal autonomy can lead to inaccurate interpretations of the district's promotion policy for SWD. Promotion policies for SWD are generally vague because of the individualization of the student's education program (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). Therefore, principals depend on the student's participation in state and district assessments to make decisions about promotion. The competing factors of IDEA, district policy, and personal values require the principal to use their judgement when interpreting vague policies (Marks &

Nance, 2007) with minimal domain criteria (Schwager et al., 1992).

Statement of Problem

In 2012, the SWD drop-out rate nearly double that of their non-disabled peers (14.4% of SWD dropped out vs. 6.3% of non-disabled students) (Stark & Noel, 2015). By 2017, the overall graduation rate in the United States reached an all-time high of 84.6%; however, the graduation rate for SWD was 65.5% (Heasley, 2019). The number of students receiving special education services served under IDEA has steadily increased in the United States. During 2011–12, the number of students served under IDEA was 6.4 million; this number increased to 7.1 million or 14% of the total US public school enrollment in 2018-2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The steady increase in the SWD population forces school districts to evaluate how SWD are assessed, instructed, and access the curriculum.

Students with learning disabilities have greater difficulty achieving proficiency on high stakes tests; therefore, they are at a greater risk of being retained (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019). District promotion policies for SWD affect graduation and dropout rates, and this begins in the elementary setting. Students who are retained in grades as early as first grade have a higher chance of dropping out in high school (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019). Therefore, the principal's interpretation of the promotion policy at the elementary level will affect the district's graduation and dropout rates in the future. Policy cannot be the only factor to influence student promotion (Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell, & Hecht, 1992) for SWD. These students may require considerations beyond academic achievement for promotion.

Purpose

District promotion policies are created by district leadership and approved by the school board. However, the principal interprets and implements the policy. The principal is responsible

for ensuring the policy is interpreted in conjunction with its intent and purpose. This study focuses on those SWD who are assessed by state standardized assessment programs. These students should comprise of 99% of the school district's SWD population. This group is not considered the 1% of the federally defined SWD population assessed by alternative assessments. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the factors that contribute to the principal's interpretation and implementation of the school district's promotion policy for SWD. Hence, the study sought to identify the factors that affect how principals interpret and implement district policy for SWD in their schools. In addition to the factors, the study sought to understand how principals influenced their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the promotion policy and policy implementation. The following research questions guided this study:

Research Questions

1. What factors influence principal interpretation of promotion policies for students with disabilities?
2. How do principals influence their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities?
3. How do principals implement their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities within their schools?

Significance of Study

School districts develop broad vague district policies, and principals use their discretion to interpret and implement the policy for their school. The policies that implementers enact do not always coincide with the specific situations they encounter (Kjaerulff, 2020); therefore, translating policy to specific situations can be difficult. This study validates current research on policy implementation by street-level bureaucrats and provides implications for loose coupling

organization theory. School districts can use this study to understand how principals interpret policy, which will assist them in guiding principal implementation.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used in this study:

1. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) - means special education and related services that: 1. Are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; 2. Meet the standards of the Virginia Board of Education; 3. Include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, middle school or secondary school education in Virginia; and 4. Are provided in conformity with an individualized education program. (VDOE, 2010).
2. Inclusion- the integration of a child with a disability in the physical regular education classroom, the delivery of services. (VDOE, 2019)
3. Individualized Education Program (IEP) - a written education plan for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a team meeting. The IEP specifies the individual educational needs and services of the child necessary to meet the child's educational needs (VDOE, 2010).
4. Individualized Education Program Team- means a group of individuals comprised of the general education teacher, the special education teacher, the LEA, the parent, and the student. This team is responsible for developing, reviewing, or revising an IEP for a child with a disability. (VDOE, 2010).
5. Local Education Agency (LEA) - means a local school division governed by a local school board or a state-operated program that is funded and administered by the Commonwealth of Virginia (VDOE, 2010).

6. Local Education Agency (LEA) representative- someone who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction of a students with a disability; is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency (IDEA, 2017)
7. Loose coupling organization- Loosely coupled organizations practice under the idea that relationships are connected to some degree, but they maintain their own identity (Shen, & Xia, 2017; Weick, 1976)
8. Policy Implementation- the action taken to put the policy into practice (Braide, 2019)
9. Policy Interpretation- determining what a policy means (Braide, 2019)
10. Rationaling- the process of promoting a student who does not meet the school district's promotion policy. The school district may rationale a student if it is in the student's best interest.
11. Street-level bureaucrat- public service workers who interact directly with those affected by policy; they have substantial discretion in the implementation of policy (Lipsky, 1969)
12. Student with disability (SWD)- means a child evaluated according to state provisions as having a disability as defined by the state who requires special education and/or related services (VDOE, 2010).
13. Tightly coupled organizations- standardized organizations with centralized authority (Hautala, Helander, & Korhonen, 2018)

Organization of Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction into the study that includes the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 discusses accountability systems for SWD, district policy interpretation and

implementation, and district promotion policies for SWD. Chapter 2 concludes with a review of the loose coupling organizational framework to provide context to the organizational structure in which policy is interpreted and implemented. Finally, an overview of street-level bureaucracy theory will give context to how policy is interpreted and implemented. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the study's research design, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. The study's findings are presented in Chapter 4; and the study will conclude with Chapter 5. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of findings, implications, and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous research on SWD and district promotion policies primarily focused on accountability. With the passage of federal legislation over the past 30 years, many researchers have explored the impact of accountability policies on SWD and how these policies have impacted the promotion of SWD. However, there is a gap in the literature in regards to how these policies are interpreted and implemented at the school level. The interpretation and implementation of these policies are important because inconsistencies can contribute to a denial of a student's Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

In this literature review, I will examine district-wide policy, SWD promotion policy, and theoretical frameworks as presented in the literature. First, I examine accountability policies for SWD in public education through exploring (a) the history of accountability policies for students and (b) the testing of SWD in an era of accountability. Next, I will explore district policy by exploring (a) district policy implementation and interpretation and (b) the inclusion of SWD in district policy. Finally, the literature reviews concludes with review the theoretical frameworks of loose coupling organizations and street-level bureaucracy.

Accountability Systems for Students with Disabilities

Over the past 30 years, public education in the United States has centered on the concept of accountability. Federal, state, and district policy have included different levels of accountability standards; resulting in school districts developing promotion policies to hold students accountable through accountability systems. SWD and teachers of SWD are not immune to accountability standards. Policies including SWD should consider the student's IEP and federal and state regulations (IDEA, 2018).

History of Accountability Policies for Students

President Ronald Reagan requested a report on the state of the American educational system as a result of the Cold War, world tension, and global competition. In 1983, the United States' education system was declared a "nation at risk" (United States, 1983). The peril of our country's education system was revealed in the Secretary of Education's report entitled "A Nation at Risk" (Graham, 2013). This report was designed "to help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions" (Gardner, 1983, p. 9). The report garnered great attention because it was written in the context of a national crisis in a competitive global system. Similar data had been reported by the College Board in 1977; however, the economic recession and competition with global powers created a perfect storm for the receptiveness of this report (Mehta, 2015). The report emphasized the lack of competitive American workers due to low levels of skill, literacy, and training from our education system (Gardner, 1983).

The report covered many aspects of education from teacher salaries and retention to technology and training. However, the focus of the report was on the uneducated unskilled workers that our education system was producing (Graham, 2013). Education leaders felt the weight of this document, especially since our country began to look towards the educational system as incompetent. Schools were burdened with the responsibility of solving the country's economic concerns through education (Mehta, 2015.) In response to the national outcry, states began to conduct their own educational studies on the state of their schools; thus a national movement towards national education reform began (Mehta, 2015).

Critical statistics such as, 23 million adults were illiterate and only one-fifth of high school seniors could write a persuasive essay (Graham, 2013), sent calls for nationwide

standardization to improve our education system. The report concluded with five recommendations:

- A. State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their 4 years of high school: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, 2 years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier (Gardner, 1983, p. 24).
- B. Schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission. This will help students do their best educationally with challenging materials in an environment that supports learning and authentic accomplishment (Gardner, 1983, p. 27).
- C. Significantly, more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day a longer school day, or a lengthened school year (Gardner, 1983, p. 29).
- D. This recommendation consists of seven parts. Each is intended to improve the preparation of teachers make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession. Each of the seven stands on its own and should not be considered solely as an implementing recommendation (Gardner, 1983, p. 30).
- E. Citizens across the Nation hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessarily to achieve these reforms, and that citizens

provide the fiscal support and stability required to bring about the reforms we propose. (Gardner, 1983, p. 32).

This report caused a shift in educational accountability. School quality was no longer measured by resources, but by student outcomes (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Teacher quality and curriculum became a focus; and the report made a direct correlation between teacher input and student outcomes. Outcomes were measured by test scores, which resulted in “a more intensive examination of the performance of students whose test scores were typically the lowest—socially and economically disadvantaged youth” (Guthrie & Springer, 2004, p. 9). Recommendations for SWD were not specially discussed in “A Nation at Risk”; however, it was indirectly related by stating, “placement and grouping of students, as well as promotion and graduation policies, should be guided by the academic progress of students and their instructional needs, rather than by rigid adherence to age” (Gardner, 1983, p. 30). The “A Nation at Risk” report launched decades of federal, state, and district policies that were designed to improve public education with implications for SWD.

The “A Nation at Risk” report laid the foundation for the first major overhaul of our education system with The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (PBS, 2018). This legislation signed by George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, required all students, including SWD, to attain proficiency on state standardized assessments within 10 years of the legislation’s passage (Simpson, Lacava, & Sampson Graner, 2004). The basic premises of “A Nation at Risk” still existed, but NCLB furthered the report’s recommendations by attaching mandates and funding. NCLB focused on standards-based reform, adequate yearly progress (AYP), and proficiency. Accountability was at the forefront. States were required to hold districts, schools, and students accountable for academic standards through standardized assessments (McGuinn,

2016). States that received federal funds had to develop a system of standards in reading and mathematics.

In addition, states had to create a high stakes testing system to measure if the students were achieving proficient levels in those standards annually (American Youth Policy Forum & Educational Policy Institute, 2004). High-stakes tests are standardized assessments that are required at certain grade levels or in certain content areas. These tests have a consequence linked to outcome for the teacher and/or student. Outcomes consists of student retention, teacher evaluation, and school funding (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2019). Finally, states were tasked with using standards assessed through high stakes testing to determine if subgroups were making adequate yearly progress.

Achievement gaps created by subgroups became a focus with the NCLB legislation. NCLB required states to develop subgroups and track their performance isolated from the whole group (Dean, 2016). Subgroups such as, black, low-income, and SWD had to make progress within the context of these standards annually (American Youth Policy Forum & Educational Policy Institute, 2004). The goal was to require all students in every school district to reach 100% proficiency in reading and math according to state standards (Ravitch, 2010). The measure was equitable, yet devastating to schools with high populations of SWD (Ravitch, 2010). NCLB focused on including SWD; however, consideration was not taken on how to educate the students in conjunction with IDEA while meeting accountability standards (American Youth Policy Forum & Educational Policy Institute, 2004). In addition, the proficiency requirement for SWD was extremely arduous for teachers who were responsible for educating these students.

The changes in NCLB was a catalyst to changes in special education federal legislation.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) was the first major special education legislation. This legislation shifted the education of SWD from institutions to public education systems focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion (Blau, 2007). EHA laid the framework for school districts receiving federal funding, if they complied with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) (Blau, 2007). In 1990, EHA was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The amended law expanded provisions and protections for SWD by adding disability categories, making provisions for postsecondary transition, and providing guidelines for disciplining SWD. Among other provisions, the amendment included guidelines for statewide, districtwide, and alternative assessments (OSEP, 2007). IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). IDEIA aligned with NCLB by including programs that include measureable standards-based annual goals. The progress on these goals would be monitored and aligned with NCLB (Weber, 2006). In addition to guaranteeing that SWD would be fully included in district-wide assessments, the assessments could be used for improvement, corrective actions, or private education options (Weber, 2006).

NCLB and IDEIA required more SWD participation in statewide and district-wide assessments; therefore, several concerns arose regarding SWD. The intent was to include and properly educate more SWD, but the opposite effect occurred in many areas (Ravitch, 2010). Some states lumped several subgroups together in order to possibly improve outcomes in achieving proficiency on standardized assessments. In other states, SWD were removed from struggling schools, classes, or districts so they would not be reflected in standardized assessment data (Hodge & Welch, 2016). These actions may have helped the school reach proficiency standards, but it harmed the instruction and growth of SWD. Simpson, Lacava, & Sampson

Graner (2004) further outlined the problems with the system by citing the

availability of adequate resources to implement the NCLB mandate; allowances for the use of flexible and individualized evaluation accommodations and modifications that address students' unique learning abilities, disabilities, and other needs; and support for personnel preparation and professional development needed to successfully implement the mandate (p. 68).

By the deadline year of 2013-2014, forty-three (43) states had requested and received waivers because they could not meet the lofty requirements of NCLB (McGuinn, 2016).

The goal of NCLB was to improve instruction and student achievement, but the legislation had problems that caused a strain on states and districts. Subgroups were a major focus of the legislation; however, appropriate funding for the new mandates alluded school districts (Dean, 2016). Subgroups often require additional supports that require additional funding. Schools districts offered supports in the form of money and professional development for teachers; however, NCLB did not properly support these underrepresented subgroups due to a lack of resources (Dean, 2016). Critics of NCLB have also cited other problems with the legislation; such as teachers were "teaching to the test" instead of teaching content and instruction, not critical thinking skills were the focus. Also, an increase in the dropout rate for disadvantaged subgroups (Dean, 2016) became alarming. The numerous problems coupled with states not meeting mandates resulted in another revamp to the American accountability system.

The flaws of NCLB led to the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA employed the knowledge of superintendents, principals, teachers, etc. (Hodge & Welch, 2016) in order to improve implementation and outcomes at the school level (Hill & Hupe, 2003). In 2015, President Obama signed the ESSA legislation. This legislation took

effect and replaced NCLB along with the waivers for the 2017-2018 academic year (McGuinn, 2016). Many of the major NCLB provisions remained the same in ESSA. Identical provisions included annual testing, the requirement to test students in Reading and Math for grades 3-8 and once in high school, Science testing at three grades, reporting of testing for subgroups (special education, English language learners, racial minorities, and students in poverty), and the requirement that at least 95 percent of students participate in the testing (McGuinn 2016). Furthermore, ESSA continues to allow states to develop aligned standardized assessments (McGuinn, 2016).

On the contrary, ESSA's most significant differences lie in accountability methods. The idea of adequate yearly progress (AYP) was removed and replaced with accountability plans (McGuinn, 2016). Under ESSA, states have more responsibility in creating standards and holding schools accountable (Hodge & Welch, 2016). Likewise, an emphasis was put on state and local autonomy, as well as, diversity. The nationwide standards of NCLB did not meet the needs of all students, so ESSA encourages "the use of multiple measures of student learning and progress, along with other indicators of student success to make school accountability decisions" (The White House, 2015). Multiple measures of learning and progress are extremely beneficial to SWD (American Youth Policy Forum & Educational Policy Institute, 2004) since they require more individualized instruction and assessment. Moreover, state and local assessments took the place of nationwide assessments (National Education Association, 2015).

By 2015, progress had been made in diversity and differentiation of assessments. State and local districts are required to assess 99% of SWD through these state/local standardized measures. ESSA maintains the NCLB provision that states can have no more than 1% of the SWD population assessed through alternative means (National Education Association, 2015).

Alternative means or alternate assessments are designed for those students with significant cognitive and adaptive disabilities (VDOE, 2015). ESSA's hallmark is more state and local control of accountability. SWD will continue to be tested at a high rate; therefore, district promotion policies will continue to be impacted under ESSA.

Students with Disabilities and Testing in era of Accountability

The federal requirements of accountability and the requirement for assessing 99% of SWD through standardized methods is clear. The increased accountability measures by IDEA and IDEIA is also clear. State policy may determine testing guidelines, but a student with disabilities' Individual Education Program (IEP) determines participation, accommodations, and modifications (Crawford & Tindal, 2006). Developing an assessment measure that is appropriate for students with and without disabilities remains controversial. High stakes testing for SWD has its flaws, but proponents of the assessments point to student growth and achievement (Ysseldyke, Nelson, Christenson, Johnson, Dennison, Sharpe, & Hawes, 2004). Instruction and IEP alignment with curricula and standards have also increased with high stakes testing (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). Ysseldyke et al. (2004) argues that closer alignment of a student's IEP with state standards and curriculum forces the student and teacher to raise expectations because the alignment will "guide the system toward students learning what they are expected to know and do" (2004, p. 82). Furthermore, more access to the general curriculum gives SWD more opportunities to learn at a more rigorous and inclusive level (Ysseldyke et al., 2004).

Most SWD in a district are required to take high-stakes assessments in accordance with the district policy. SWD who are instructed by the general curriculum and assessed by the state's standardized assessments are expected to meet the same levels of proficiency. A student's IEP cannot opt a student out of standardized assessments, but it does provide for

accommodations and/or modifications based on the student's disability (VDOE, 2015). Unlike a student who is assessed by alternative assessments, SWD assessed by standardized assessments have the cognitive ability to perform appropriately on the tests. The IEP team develops IEPs for the student with appropriate standards-based goals, accommodations, and services that will prepare the student for the high stakes tests (Yell et al., 2012). Since several districts and states have used these tests as barriers to graduation, parents of SWD have begun to file lawsuits stating the tests violates IDEA (Yell, Katsiyannis, Collins, & Losinski, 2012).

Critics, on the other hand, have stated flaws with a system of high stakes testing as a measure of accountability. Much of the critic angst comes from the district or local assessments. Districts develop policy using high stakes testing to hold students accountable for promotion or graduation (Smith & Fey, 2000). These tests have limitations due to margin of errors, random variation, and the validity of test preparation (Ravitch, 2010). A state should consider the rigor of the test, the alignment to the standards, and reliability (Cross, Rebarber, & Torres, 2004) when developing the high stakes tests. Rigor, alignment, and reliability ensures the test is valid and measures its intended target. However, some districts do not clearly define what the intended target is in local assessments.

Districts create local assessments or benchmark assessments to track student progress throughout the school year (Bulkley, Christman, Goertz, & Lawrence, 2010). They also give formative information for teachers and schools to address instructional needs (Bulkley et al., 2010). For this reason, districts have used these local benchmark assessments as a predictor of end-of-state standardized outcomes. High stakes tests are valid depending on whether or not they sufficiently represent the overall interest and goals of the school. District assessments are not always valid; therefore, intermingling the tests with promotion policies can cause higher

failure rates and dropout rates (William, 2010). Bulkley et al., (2010) found that benchmark tests were given at grade level causing a tremendous impediment to those students who read significantly below grade level.

In addition to testing validity, studies have shown that high stakes tests force teachers to focus on a narrow portion of the curriculum. Critical thinking skills can be suppressed or underdeveloped by the narrow focus of teaching to the tests (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Teachers teach to the test because they are also held accountable with high stakes tests; consequently, teacher and student accountability can become indistinguishable (Anderson & International Institute for Educational Planning, 2005). Teachers may focus on their own accountability instead of ensuring the students are elevating their critical thinking and other goals as designated by the IEP.

SWD affected by high-stakes assessments are generally educated in the general education setting with support from a special educator. This setting is an “inclusion” setting. The inclusion setting involves collaboration between both the general and special teacher, as well as, an accepting attitude of the student despite the impact of the disability. Furthermore, principal support and a willingness to exhaust teaching strategies (DeRoche, 2013) is vital to the student’s success. Teachers in the inclusion setting must change their perspective (DeRoche, 2013) of assessments. Abedi and Faltis (2015), explained how SWD need to have “assessments accessible for them so they may fully demonstrate what they know, and what they are able to do academically.” (p. 39). High stakes tests are not an appropriate measure to assess what individual SWD know. The standardization of the tests does not allow for flexibility within the assessment. Teachers use assessments to determine if IEP goals are being met and/or if the accommodations and modifications are appropriate. Exposure to more rigorous standards and

participation in high-stakes testing gives SWD more opportunities of success through raised expectations (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). Promotion or retention are also unintended consequences of high stakes for SWD. Retention is a by-product of high stakes test failure, and it does not increase learning. However, it is an indicator of whether a student will drop out of school (Katsiyannis et al., 2007). Research has shown that achievement is not improved for SWD when they are retained (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000).

States consistently have had difficulty aligning IEP goals to state standards (Ysseldyke et al., 2004), which is problematic because progress on annual IEP goals is required under IDEA. Furthermore, SWD are receiving more accommodations through their IEP in order to increase their chances of passing high-stakes testing (Ysseldyke et al., 2004); however, more accommodations may lead to less self-reliance and self-advocacy. School systems have had concerns with SWD taking high-stakes testing because these students historically have a high failure rate (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Jones, 2007). As a result, some schools develop exclusionary measures that reduce the number of SWD who participate in testing in order to limit the participation of low-performing students and protect accreditation associated with testing (Ravitch, 2010). This unlawful practice denies SWD of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

District Policy

The United States Department of Education's (USDOE) mission of promoting "student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (USDOE, 2017) is carried out by pursuing "access and excellence through the administration of programs that cover every area of education and range from preschool education through postdoctoral research" (USDOE, 2017). State governments are

formed to implement the mission and goals of the USDOE. States are given wide latitude to make policies for education in their states; and local boards of education and local school administrators have the primary duty to make decisions (Elmore, 1993) and direct policy. However, the relationship between state government, local boards, district leaders, and school leaders, can be seen as combative (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990).

National reform movements and national policies such as NCLB and ESSA give state and local boards the context by which to develop policy. For this reason, the manner in which the national government frames the education problem (Coburn, Touré, & Yamashita, 2009) and the amount of urgency the problem in given will determine state and local policies. Public opinion, climate, and popularity can also shape the national reform movements (Morris, 1996); which will drive the support and context for local policies. National policies of the 1980's was the driving force behind state and local policy that focused on standardization, formal requirements, and mastery (Morris, 1996). NCLB, then, gave birth to state and local policies that were focused on accountability and subgroups. ESSA is furthering the idea of accountability, subgroups, and progress while allowing for more state and local autonomy

District Policy Interpretation and Implementation

Local boards are tasked with creating district policy because they understand the local population, economy, and resources (Elmore, 2000); as a result, policymaking is directly related to the district and community. Once policy is created, it is interpreted. Braide explains that policy “requires deliberate efforts of interpretation . . . a policy means more than one thing, and those meanings are conveyed in more than one way (2019, p. 154). Hence, policy can be interpreted in various ways depending on the interpreter. Consequently, policy intentions are not always singular; they may be developed within the context of a range of intentions (Amdur &

Mero-Jaffe, 2017). Amdur and Mero-Jaffe (2017) explained how test-based accountability systems as prime examples of policy that is developed with multiple intentions. Unclear policy without a clear intent can lead to misinterpretations (Braide, 2019) that may alter the intent and values of the district (Amdur & Mero-Jaffe, 2017).

Local districts act in concert with state and federal policy, but the amount of localities in each state can cause fragmentation within the state (Elmore 1993). Principals are not always enthusiastic or passionate about the policy they implement, so they may not be motivated for the policy to succeed (Fowler, 2013). The principals' discretion creates interpretation and implementation differences throughout a district (Marks & Nance, 2007), often negating the intent of the policy (Braide, 2019). For example, school integration of the 1950s was a result of broad federal and state initiatives to further social justice goals and address the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Mattheis, 2017). However, local interpretation and implementation differed across states. Equally, causing differences in interpretation by school administrators based on their social justice stance and context (Fowler, 2013).

Policymakers develop policy based on broad symbolic ideals followed by mandates disregarding administrative implementation and feedback (Morris, 1996). Unfortunately, policy implementation is difficult because policy is written broadly with vague goals (Braide, 2019) and no prescription for implementation. Broad ideals made by state policymakers fail to give clear guidance, intent, or outcomes; therefore, weakening the effectiveness of local implementation (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Policy implementation manifests itself differently based on the implementer; thus, unexpected outcomes and future policy implications are the product of implementation (Braide, 2019). The allocation of resources, accountability, and definitions of “good education” are major unintended consequences of policy (Braide, 2019). Unfortunately,

inadequate implementation also becomes a side effect when district leaders and district goals change (Bergan & White, 2004) along with resources, accountability, and values.

Hemmer and Baker (2016) recognized that implementer's interpretation and organizational structures can change or reshape policy. Policy is disseminated over the different hierarchies of authority, resulting in varied interpretations implementation (Spillane, 1996). Gillis (2017) studied interpretations of teacher evaluation policies. He found that implementer flexibility allowed for more time and resources in developing practices based on their best interpretations. This led to vast variations of evaluation practices across the district. Policymakers often assume that policy implementers understand the policy and its intent; thus discounting varied interpretations and biases (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

Elmore discussed the connection between policy and implementation with the concepts of forward and backward mapping. Forward mapping is a top-down process that begins with a clear statement of intent with specific steps of implementation; and it ends with a clear statement of outcome (Elmore, 1979). This top-down process does not take into account political factors that may arise from opponents of the policy or those who believe in other solutions not included in the policy (Mugambwa, 2018). Conversely, backward mapping is a bottom-up process focusing on outcomes. Clear administrative responsibilities and outcomes increase the probability of successful policy implementation (Elmore, 1979). Backward mapping emphasizes the role of policy implementers but also highlights the inconsistencies that may exist due to power of implementers (Mugambwa, 2018). A lack of policy clarity, purpose, or policy outcome can undermine implementation (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002), and the probability of consistent interpretation is decreased.

Students with Disabilities in District Promotion Policies

Specialized instruction is a staple of the IEP for SWD. FAPE ensures that all students with an IEP receive the special education and related services necessary to meet the unique needs of the child in preparation for education, employment, and independent living needs (USDOE, 2015). The IEP team does not have the authority to make decisions regarding the promotion or retention of a student. In a letter from the USDOE Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services dated November 9, 2000, the federal government has stated that “Part B of the IDEA specifically does not address standards for retention or promotion of SWD. Rather, the establishment of standards for promotion and retention for all students, including SWD, is a State and/or local function.” (USDOE, 2000, p. 1). The IEP guides the student’s academic program by providing goals, services, accommodations and modifications that will aid in accessing the general curriculum (Drasgow et al., 2001). Curricula and assessment methods (standardized or alternative) should be the primary source for determining promotion or retention for SWD; however, the student’s individual data and long term goals can also be considered (Blakenstein & Noguera, 2015).

IDEA governs federal regulations for SWD; nevertheless, each state also has its own state regulations. This research took place in the state of Virginia; therefore, Virginia will be the focus of state policy. The IEP team determines placement for SWD and placement may determine how the student will be assessed. Assessment, in turn, determines the guidelines for promotion. Under the Virginia Board of Education’s “Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia”

Each student should learn the relevant grade level/course subject matter before promotion to the next grade. The district superintendent shall certify to the Department of Education

that the district's promotion/retention policy does not exclude students from membership in a grade, or participation in a course, in which SOL tests are to be administered. Each school shall have a process, as appropriate, to identify and recommend strategies to address the learning, behavior, communication, or development of individual children who are having difficulty in the educational setting. (VDOE, 2012)

The majority of SWD are enrolled in courses that require proficiency on high stakes tests (SOLs) in order to be promoted to the next grade.

The IEP team is comprised of a general education teacher, a special education, and a Local Education Agency (LEA) representative (VDOE, 2012), and the LEA representative is usually a school administrator. Each member of the IEP team has input in the student's placement. The principal, as the LEA representative, and the teacher's perception and values on inclusion (Praisner, 2003) can determine placement and assessment methods for SWD. Federal legislation does not require or prevent states from permitting principals from applying promotion standards to SWD (USDOE, 2000). A principal's perceptions and values contributes to the interpretation of the district policy that governs promotion. Thus, the federal government and the states have given principals great power when interpreting policy on SWD promotion.

In a study of principal's attitudes towards SWD in the general education setting, elementary principals held a common belief that students with social and emotional needs, such as Emotional Disability and Autism are less appropriate for a general education classroom (Praisner, 2003). Students with Emotional Disabilities or Autism do not always have a learning disability, and they should be included in the general education setting. Exclusion from the general education setting can deny the student of FAPE (Dragow et al., 2001) and an adequate opportunity of passing high stakes testing used for promotion purposes. Principals invest more

in high stakes testing than teachers (Crawford & Tindal, 2006) because of statewide accountability systems. This investment in accountability systems affects the principal's beliefs in how SWD are assessed.

Theoretical Frameworks

Loosely Coupled Organizations

Organizational structure will determine how policy is interpreted and implemented. Coupling refers to the relationships in an organization, and the strength of these relationships will determine if the organization is tightly or loosely coupled (Beekun, & Glick, 2001). Tightly coupled organizations are standardized with centralized authority (Hautala, Helander, & Korhonen, 2018). These organizations generally operate with firm procedures and clear hierarchies of authority (Beekun & Glick, 2001); as a result, policies are narrowly interpreted and implemented as written. Moreover, employees in these organizations have little independence (Pancs, 2017) because they follow prescribed rules with embedded accountability measures. Tightly coupled organizations often do not value the independence of their employees, so these structures are less innovative (Hautala, Helander, & Korhonen, 2018). Leaders in tightly coupled organizations tend to focus on short-term changes (Pancs, 2017) rather than long term systemic changes. Figure 1 illustrates that tightly coupled organizations are extremely interconnected and any change creates a chain reaction in the organization. These highly structured organizations refrain from instituting departmental changes since change affects the entire organization resulting in system reorganization (Frandsen, Morsing, & Vallentin, 2013).

Tightly Coupled Organization Structure

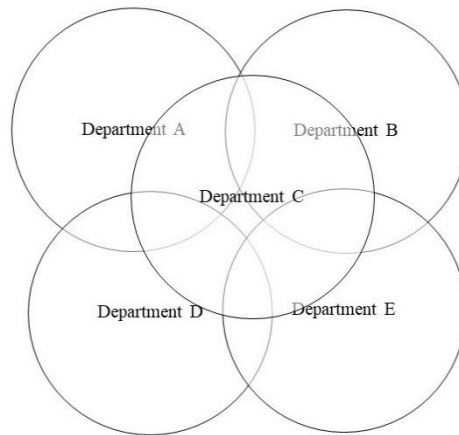


Figure 1: Departments within a Tightly Coupled Organization are interconnected and dependent on each other

Loosely coupled organizations, on the other hand, focus on shared beliefs, norms, and independence (Hautala, Helander, & Korhonen, 2018). They operate under the idea that relationships are connected to some degree, but they maintain their own identity (Shen, & Xia, 2017; Weick, 1976). Organizations contain hierarchical elements of a top, middle, and bottom; loosely coupled structures suggests that each level is independent yet interconnected (Orton & Weick, 1990). Figure 2, shows the dual independence and interconnectivity of loosely coupled organizations. Long-term adaptability and systemic change is encouraged (Pancs, 2017) within these systems along with flexibility and innovation. An observer should not assume that all structures and policies are slack and weak (Aurini, J. 2012). Loosely coupled organizations do have weaker relationships and bonds, however, the entire organization may not operate in the same manner.

Loosely Coupled Organization Structure

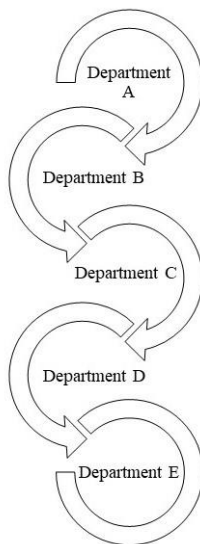


Figure 2: Departments within Loosely Coupled Organizations are dependent yet interconnected

Tightly coupled organizations usually emerge in highly bureaucratic systems (Shen, & Xia, 2017). School districts have bureaucratic elements, but the hierarchy of school districts promote autonomy, professional control, and weak centralization (Shen, & Xia, 2017). Consequently, school districts are often considered loosely coupled organizations. The loose nature is apparent in the principals' latitude in the school and the teachers' autonomy the classroom. However, tension exists in this paradigm as teachers autonomously implement procedures in the classroom and principals seek to develop standardized accountability (DeRoche, 2013). Teachers have had vast autonomy in their pedagogy and professional goals; however, as the accountability landscape changes in the United States, teachers are losing their control (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen (2018). The standardized accountability causes tightly coupled organizations to emerge within school districts.

The education system by definition is a loosely coupled organization due to autonomy and innovation; however, the recent education reforms of accountability has caused a paradigm

shift to a more tightened system (Shen, & Xia, 2017). Opposing factions have emerged on this issue. Those supporting a top-down approach to education argue, “Loose coupling is a problem and the key to educational improvement is to find mechanisms to tighten the educational system. . . [They] advocate a top-down approach with a change model for the bureaucratic realm.” (Shen, & Xia, 2017, p. 659-660). On the other hand, supporters of a bottom-up approach contend, “Loose coupling is the nature of the educational organization; to reach the technical core, educational improvement needs to be delivered from the bottom-up.” (Shen, & Xia, 2017, p. 659). The top-down or bottom-up approach in policy implementation is dependent upon the organizational structure; and finding the right approach within the organization structure will increase the potential of policy success.

Street-Level Bureaucracy

Policy implementation not only depends on the motivation that administrators have to implement the policy, but also on other workplace factors that affect performance. Policy may be developed at the upper levels, but it is carried out at the local or street-level. Therefore, the implementers of policy are considered street-level bureaucrats. Street-level bureaucrats are public employees “who, in their face-to-face encounters with citizens; ‘represent’ government to the people” (Lipsky, 1969 p. 1). Examples of street-level bureaucrats are nurses, police officers, teachers, social workers, and principals. Street-level bureaucrats are also known as frontline workers because they are on the frontline of policy implementation (frontline implementation).

Street-level bureaucrats are often far removed from the original intent of the policy; therefore, they interact and respond to policy using a limited amount of information (Tummers, & Bekkers, 2014). Policy interpretation and implementation varies based on the perspective of the street-level bureaucrat(s). This influence over policy implementation is a result of constant

interaction with those affected by the policy and the independence within the organization to make decisions (Lipsky, 1969). The wide latitude afforded to street-level bureaucrats magnifies their power through discretion. Discretionary freedom is innate in street-level bureaucracies (Thomann, 2015) due to the proximity to those affected by policy and the many decisions they make.

Street-level bureaucrats are more willing to find meaning in the policy they implement when they are given discretionary autonomy (Tummers, & Bekkers, 2014). In a forward-mapping structure, street-level bureaucrats can implement policy in a rogue manner when pursuing personal goals (Tummers, & Bekkers, 2014) disregarding policy intent. On the other hand, in a backward-mapping structure, discretion is expected (Tummers, & Bekkers, 2014). Meyers and Nielson (2012) explained the importance of clear policy making stating that unclear policies lead to “discretionary decisions that favor [implementers] values and beliefs” (p. 307).

Street-level bureaucrats are usually at a disadvantage when they implement policy due to a lack of appropriate information and resources. These frontline workers, create practices, procedures, modify goals, and ration resources in order to implement the policy (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977) the best they can. This immediate decision-making causes street-level bureaucrats to be the de facto policy makers that actively shape policy through interpretation (Meyers & Nielson, 2012). Bergan and White (2005) studied case management policy implementation by nurses. They determined that policy implementation depends on the “vagueness” of the policy including the wording and the willingness of implementers to “bend” the policy and use discretion. The study suggested “in the absence of precise guidance . . . [policy could] be interpreted either positively or negatively, and be either pro or anti case management, at any of the three intermediary levels.” (Bergan & White, 2005, p. 8). As a result, the response to the

policy affected how the policy was implemented. Street-level bureaucrats do not make the policy, but they interpret and implement policy for those for whom the policy was intended.

Lipsky argued that the decisions, routines, coping mechanisms, and work pressures of street-level bureaucrats become the “public policies they carry out” (Hupe & Hill, 2007); thus, making formal laws rather ceremonial in nature. Street-level bureaucrats become policymakers when policy is “ambiguous or internally contradictory, policy implementation requires discretionary decision-making at the point of delivery, and the routine activities of front-line workers can be neither fully monitored nor controlled” (Brodin, 2008, p. 321). Discretion and decision-making are key for street-level bureaucrat policy interpretation and implementation

Lipsky identifies three major factors that contribute to policy implementation and interpretation by street-level bureaucrats: the resources available, the challenge to authority, and the vague expectations (Lipsky, 1971). The following sections of the literature review will discuss how these three factors act independently and in concert with one another in policy implementation. Finally, a connection will be made between Lipsky’s factors and ethical decision-making to develop a big picture of policy interpretation and implementation.

Available Resources

Resources can come in many forms. They can be tangible resources that are unique to the operation of an organization or intangible resources, such as information. Human resources and money are the capital needed to operate an organization. Information, in comparison, is always a valuable resource that can help or hinder any organization (Lipsky, 1969). All forms of resources work together with one another when making decisions. The street-level bureaucrat needs information, time to process information, materials, and staff to mobilize the information (Lipsky, 1969). Policy implementation is dependent on how these resources are interconnected

and how the resources are used.

Street-level bureaucrats are responsible for negotiating the use of available resources. Policy is developed idealistically believing resources will be readily available, but in reality organizations operate in a bureaucratic structure where needs are defined by the people that are served (Bergen & White, 2004). In a study of adult social workers in a social service department, Evans (2010) researched professional discretion versus resources and discretionary practices. The study found that the social workers relied heavily on their discretion because the resource manuals were so complicated. The resources were virtually ignored and replaced with frontline worker discretion (Evans, 2010). Inadequate resources can make it difficult to implement policy as intended, but the policy should still be implemented. As a result, decisions are made on how to implement policy without the necessary resources; thus “discretionary judgment” (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010) and decision-making are key elements for street-level bureaucrats.

On the other hand, resource perception is important. Policy implementation can be affected if street-level bureaucrats do not perceive that they have access to necessary resources. In a Swiss study of veterinary inspectors, researchers studied the discrepancy between the goals set by policy and the resources available to achieve the goals. They specifically examined if veterinary inspectors were able to implement policy with perceived resources. The study found that the inspectors viewed human resources as more important than other resources. Furthermore, they perceived the policy as meaningful when resources are perceived as sufficient (Thomann, 2015). The choices that are made regarding resources also affects implementation (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Researchers have argued that street-level bureaucrats play a large role in not only implementing policy, but also making policy (Moore, 1987). Vague policies and lack

of needed resources can reshape the perceptions of what resources are actually needed for implementation (Bergen & White, 2004). Street-level bureaucrats become accustomed to implementing policy with less resources, and policy makers react by believing that no more resources are necessary. Unfortunately, this can be very dangerous when the lack of resource is information and training.

Challenge to Authority

Policy is expected to be implemented and executed according to the standards of the leader. In all organizations, one person or a group has authority over another. Generally, policy makers have power over those who implement the policy; and those who implement policy have power over those served by the policy (Fowler, 2013). Policy interpreters have a sense of control over those governed by the policy because they take vague policies and exert their discretion (Hupe & Hill, 2007). The amount of discretion in interpreting vague policies correlate to the professional control that the street-level bureaucrat feels (Taylor, 2007) within their organization. They feel a lower sense of threat or challenge to authority when they project a high degree of power (Lipsky, 1969).

Policy is interpreted differently depending on the relationship or the power struggle within the organization. Leadership structures that invite collaboration have employees who feel more empowered to use their own discretion (Taylor, 2007). In addition, street-level bureaucrats “are assumed by many to have professional expertise and knowledge” (Meyers & Nielson, 2012, p. 311) over those the policy will affect. This close knowledge of the clients allows street-level bureaucrats latitude in decision-making. These frontline workers become emboldened to influence and interpret policy because they feel their authority will not be challenged, (Meyers & Nielson, 2012).

May and Winter (2007) studied Municipal caseworkers who implement employment policy. They found that authority figures had the greatest influence on caseworker employment implementation decisions. The caseworkers were more empowered to deviate from policy when their authority figures supported their interpretation of the policy or personal goals. Likewise, the study showed that “the amount of supervision and the degree of delegation” (p. 469) by authority figures affected the amount of attention to the policy and the degree of deviation from caseworkers.

The amount of control that authority figures have in an organization will determine how street-level bureaucrats implement policy. Meyers and Vorsanger (2007) suggests that “hierarchical accountability structures” only slightly influence frontline workers. Organizations with a collaborative spirit derived from collective beliefs, norms, and practices have leaders who are more supported. Frontline workers are more apt to support and implement the policies when practices and programs are in support of the organizations’ shared beliefs (Meyers & Vorsanger 2007). Implementation attempts are diminished when implementers do not support the initiative of the authority figure. Evans (2010) argued the extreme importance of the organizational culture lies in discretion. He also found that street-level bureaucratic discretion was maximized by hierarchical conflict between employees and managers.

Vague Expectations

Employees perform several roles when performing their duties in the workplace. These roles may have different supervisors with different expectations and different measures of evaluation (Meyers & Nielson, 2012). Street-level bureaucrats juggle their different roles while trying to appease their various supervisors or stakeholders that require different expectations. Hupe and Hill (2007) describe these roles in terms of horizontal and vertical relationships.

Employees have horizontal relationships with co-workers on a peer spectrum; but they also have vertical relationships with department heads and supervisors. School systems, for example, have various departments and supervisors. The principal is the leader of the school, but the assistant principal may direct the special education program. The supervisor of curriculum and instruction may oversee instruction, but the supervisor of special education will oversee SWD. Teachers and school administrators follow direction from all parties even though they have different agendas and expectations.

The problems that vague expectations cause was highlighted in a study of EMS workers. Henerson and Pandey (2013) studied the decision-making of EMS workers as they made quick decisions with conflicting expectations from supervisors and narrators. EMS workers made in-the-moment decisions, although they were given clear expectations by supervisors. The EMS workers had to weigh the expectation and information given by the narrators against the expectations of the supervisors. The narrator explained the most appropriate action at the time, but supervisory expectations and guidelines had been made clear (Henderson, & Pandey, 2013). Findings in the study concluded, “Expertise and situational knowledge for both the street-level bureaucrat and the frontline supervisor were critical” in determining which expectations to comply with or disregard (Henderson, & Pandey, 2013, p. 177). Vague expectations cause street-level bureaucrats to use their best knowledge and judgements to make decisions in the moment.

Complex expectations cause street-level bureaucrats to choose which rules to apply (Meyers & Nielson, 2012). Street-level bureaucrats have the expectation that “they will treat individuals fairly and impartially” (Lipsky, 1969, p. 8). Vague or contradictory job expectations can hinder the overarching expectation of fairness causing street-level bureaucrats to redefine or

change expectations in their roles (Lipsky, 1969). Redefining or changing roles cause the street-level bureaucrat to gain or shift power (Lipsky, 1969); as a result, policy may not be implemented as intended. .

Street-level bureaucracy and Decision Making

Policy decision-making can create contradiction to policy (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010) or policy intent. The decision-making by street-level bureaucrats gives them the discretion to interpret policy (Taylor, 2007) and in some organizations make policy. Those directly affected by policy are not always considered in decision-making. Street-level bureaucrats have been criticized in all areas of public policy for “being insensitive, unprepared . . . incompetent, resistant to change” (Lipsky, 1971, p. 1); as a result, policies are not interpreted and implemented effectively.

Resources, authority, and expectations, are not the only influences on decision-making. Taylor (2007) used teachers as an example to explain, “The discretionary power of the teacher may in part depend upon the school leadership” (p. 562). Lyons and Masesschalck (2010) furthers this thought by stating that policy implementers make decisions based on “the degree of consensus over [the organization’s] goals and objectives (p. 2). Leaders influenced by values and ethics guide decision-making in their organizations in which they set goals and objectives. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between ethics and other key factors of decision-making. Decisions are made based on the available resources, challenge to authority, and vague expectations, but ethics are also intertwined in each decision.

Ethics in Decision Making



Figure 3: Ethics operates within street-level bureaucracy theory

Ethics become a part of decision making when consequences affect others (Loyens & Maesschalek, 2007). Leaders are human, and they are flawed with stereotypical beliefs and biases. These biases are not always overt and the leader may not know they exist, but stereotypes and biases affect how leaders make decisions within their organization (Lipsky, 1969). Values should not lead to misguided decision-making (Loyens & Maesschalek, 2007), but when the values are embedded into the organizational structure, the misguided decision-making may not be obvious. Policy implementers view their actions as fair and neutral; but employees can perceive them as stereotypical and biased (Lipsky, 1969). For this reason, it is difficult to overcome the ethical stigma that confronts leaders during decision-making.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This purpose of this study was to understand how principals interpret and implement district promotion policies for SWD in their schools. This study concentrated on those SWD who are assessed by state standardized assessment programs. These students should comprise of 99% of the SWD population. This group is not considered the 1% of the federally defined SWD population assessed by alternative assessments. This study was designed to address the following questions using the street-level bureaucracy and loose coupling theoretical frameworks.

1. What factors influence principal interpretation of promotion policies for students with disabilities?
2. How do principals influence their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities?
3. How do principals implement their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities within their schools?

This chapter will address the research design, sample population, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and research limitations.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study. Qualitative research is beneficial when using human experiences to answer research questions because it offers insight to information that is “often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals” (Mack, 2005, p.1). Qualitative research designs can be accomplished through several methods; however, a case study method was most appropriate for this study. Case

studies are an effective way to maximize or amplify what can be learned in a short amount of time when effective cases are used (Tellis, 1997). Case studies are meaningful qualitative research methods because they put parameters on the study. Narrowing the focus of the case study and placing parameters on what is being studied allows the research to stay on track (Baxter, 2008) and not exploit or inflate the research.

This research design examines the “dynamics present in a single setting” (Eisenhardt, 1989), and addresses the *how*, *why*, and *what* of a study. This study sought to understand how principals interpret and implement district-wide policy. Interpretation and implementation is best explored through *how*, *why*, and *what* questions, so a qualitative case study method was used for the research. Case studies are ideal when researching decision-making because context and setting must be considered (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Setting and context was important for this study because the principal’s decision-making takes place within the context of their school.

The study took place in one school district in one state. This gave me the opportunity to understand how several different elementary schools, principals, and teachers interpreted and implemented the same policy. A multi-case study was most appropriate to achieve these results. Case studies can be completed through several methods: Explanatory, Exploratory, Descriptive, Multiple case, Intrinsic, and Instrumental (Baxter, 2008). Explanatory, Exploratory, and Descriptive (as the name suggests) seek to explain, explore, and describe respectively a particular phenomenon (Baxter, 2008). On the other hand, the Intrinsic method reflects on the interest of the researcher, and the Instrumental method seeks to gain knowledge beyond the obvious (Tellis, 1997). Single case studies with an embedded design explores several facets of a single case study (Eisenhardt, 1989), but Multiple case studies examines differences among and

between different cases. The objective of multiple case studies is to draw comparisons and transfer the findings across several settings (Baxter, 2008).

This study is a multi-case study that focuses on examining cases that are different in size, location, ethnicity, etc. (Yin, 2004). Developing an appropriate sample population is important to understanding the diversity and range of the entire population (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The intent for this study was to select three elementary schools within the district's distinct northern, central, and southern areas of the school district. Studying an elementary school in each of these areas was representative of the district's diverse population.

Case Selection

The study took place in a school district located in Virginia. For purposes of this study, the school district will be given the pseudonym "Tayden School District" located in "Tayden City", Virginia. The scope of the research did not allow me to study all of the schools in the school district. A sample population was needed to keep the study manageable and targeted. Convenience and Purposive sampling techniques were considered. Convenience sampling can be called Haphazard or Accidental Sampling because it is random in nature based on a broad criteria of accessibility, time, location, etc. (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This method assumes that the target population is a homogenous group; therefore, the outcomes will not be different between a random or pre-selected sample (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Tayden City schools has three distinct regions that are adjacent to and possibly share characteristics of six different cities; for this reason, Convenience sampling was not appropriate for this study. A random sample could not capture the diverse nature of the school district's unique regional differences.

In contrast to Convenience sampling's random selection, Purposive sampling groups "participants according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question" (Mack, 2005, p.5). This preselection criterion is important because it concentrates on the thoughtful and measured selection of participants based on the participant's specific knowledge, expertise, or characteristics (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Preparation is key because the researcher must be thoroughly knowledgeable of the population's culture in order to select the most effective participants for the sample population (Tongco, 2007). A strong understanding of Tayden City and the school district was crucial in determining the need for a Purposive sample. The populations of three unique areas of the district is important context for the composition of the school district. I determined that this study would benefit from a preselected sample of administrators and teachers within each of the district's three regions and district-level personnel; thus Purposive sampling was used.

Tayden City school district has 18 traditional schools; this study focused on elementary schools and third grade in particular. The third grade was chosen because, in Virginia, third grade is a pivotal year when students begin to take state assessments (SOL tests) (VDOE, 2012). District promotions usually change in third grade to reflect the changes in accountability systems. The preselected criteria included the third grade general education and special education co-teaching inclusion team, the assistant principal, and principal from the same school. In addition to the school level participants, the Director of Elementary Education and the Director of Special Education was preselected.

The selection for these preselected persons was deliberate. The principal was chosen as the Instructional leader and overall leader of the school. In the Tayden City school district, the assistant principal in each school serves as the Local Education Agency (LEA) representative.

Therefore, it was important to use the assistant principal because they have knowledge of the special education programming, they attend the IEP meetings, and they disseminate special education information to teachers. Moreover, the LEA supervises the specially designed instruction for SWD; is knowledgeable of the general education curriculum; and the availability of resources of the public agency (Parker, 2018). The third grade was chosen because it is a crucial academic transition year for all students since the rigor changes and SOLs test begin.

Participant Selection

All schools and participants in this study were given a pseudonym in accordance with the Informed Consent Document (Appendix A). Elementary schools within each of the district's areas were contacted in three phases. Emails were sent to the principal, assistant principal, and the third grade Inclusion (general education and special education) team (Appendix B). Initially, the following schools were preselected: George Washington Elementary in the central region, Westpoint Elementary in the northern region, and Easton Falls Elementary in the southern region. These schools were selected based on their geographic location within the city and their SWD population. George Washington Elementary was not selected for this study because only the principal and assistant principal consented to the study. Easton Falls Elementary was not selected because only the principal consented.

In the next phase, Bryant Fields Elementary in the southern region and R.S. Shores Elementary and Oakbrook Elementary in the central region were emailed. However, only the principal and assistant principal at Bryant Fields consented to the study, so they were not selected. R.S. Shores Elementary school was not chosen because only the principal consented. The final phase of participant selection included Hillcrest and Stonebridge Elementary schools in the central region. However, only the assistant principal at Hillcrest consented; therefore, they

were not selected for this study. Consequently, this study included the Director of Elementary Leadership, the Director of Special Education, and the principal, assistant principal, and third grade Inclusion team from Westpoint Elementary, Oakbrook Elementary, and Stonebridge Elementary schools. Table 1 gives a depiction of the participant's demographics.

Table 1:

Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Participant's Title	Location in the District	Years of Experience in the District	Years of Experience in Current Role
Ms. McNeill	Director of Elementary Leadership	Central Office	20	18
Ms. Holland	Director of Special Education	Central Office	15	15
Ms. Clinton	Principal	Oakbrook Elementary	4	1
Mrs. Coswell	Assistant Principal	Oakbrook Elementary	12	3
Ms. Wells	General Education Teacher	Oakbrook Elementary	2	2
Ms. Dodd	Special Education Teacher	Oakbrook Elementary	2	2
Mrs. Mayo	Principal	Stonebridge Elementary	11	4
Mrs. Highsmith	Assistant Principal	Stonebridge Elementary	1	1
Ms. Powell	General Education Teacher	Stonebridge Elementary	9	9
Mrs. Franklin	Special Education Teacher	Stonebridge Elementary	27	27
Mrs. Vaughan	Principal	Westpoint Elementary	24	10
Ms. Covington	Assistant Principal	Westpoint Elementary	8	2
Ms. Wells	General Education Teacher	Westpoint Elementary	10	10
Ms. Fields	Special Education Teacher	Westpoint Elementary	6	4

Data Collection

Data are the foundation of research and provides the basis for insightful analysis; therefore, data should be gathered from several different sources to ensure a thorough analysis

(Bogdan and Biklin, 2007). Yin (2004) explained, when “collecting case study data, the main idea is to ‘triangulate’ or establish converging lines of evidence to make your findings as robust as possible” (p. 9). Data collection for this research took the form of document review and interviews. I revisited previous phases of data collection to reexamine documents and/or questions to modify the next phase of the data collection to ensure the data collection aligned with the purpose of the study. The process of returning to previous stages of the data collection process occurred quickly, so changes could be made to the next data collection phase as needed (Yin, 2004).

Interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study because the study focused on the beliefs, practices, opinions, and experiences of individuals (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Interviews can range from Unstructured to Semi-structured to Structured. Unstructured interviews have “minimal control” and are “free-flowing”. These interviews are open to flow in a variety of directions due to the lack of control that the interviewer has (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). In contrast, Structured interviews are extremely controllable. Questions are asked in the same order to all participants, survey-like, and often scripted (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). I determined that a Semi-structured interview method was most appropriate. Semi-structured interviews gave me the flexibility of using predetermined questions with the ability to ask questions in different orders and to ask probing questions. This type of interview is more conversational “and often used in policy research” (Harrell & Bradley, 2009, p. 27).

I sent each participant an email explaining the study; and requesting their participation (Appendix B). Each email contained a copy of the Informed Consent Document (Appendix A), Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement (Appendix C), and the school district’s approval for me to conduct research in the district (Appendix D). Participants had the opportunity to ask

questions about the study prior to consent. Written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Interview questions varied based on the job title and expertise of the participant (Appendix E). The principals, assistant principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers received the same questions based on their job title. Questions for the Director of Elementary Leadership and the Director of Special Education varied.

All initial interviews were conducted face-to face; which is extremely effective because it allows the researcher to not only listen, but to also watch nonverbal actions, expressions, and body language (Opdenakker, 2006). Interviews ranged in time from 30 to 45 minutes. During the interviews, I explained that follow-up questions might be necessary depending upon the additional information gathered during the data analysis process. Follow-up questions were emailed to principals due to scheduling conflicts, but all follow-up teacher interviews were completed face to face (jointly with the general and special Education teachers).

In addition to interviews, I reviewed public and private documents from the school district. Public documents included enrollment, demographic, state accreditation, etc. about each school from Virginia Department of Education's website. This was necessary to develop a foundational background of each case study. I also reviewed the district's promotion policy for elementary students to ensure a thorough knowledge of all facets of the promotion policy. In addition, I read the grading and instruction guidelines to gain further understanding of the district's regulations.

I obtained private documents from central office leaders. These private documents included the previous district promotion policy with strikethrough changes, the district's retention meeting forms, the district's parental letter for possible retention, and the number of students (all students and SWD) that were retained and rationed from each school over the

immediate past three years. This data gave me perspective on the retention process.

Data Analysis

The usage of a variety of data sources increases the validity of the findings through triangulation (Yin, 2004). Outcomes and findings can be referenced and crosschecked in other sources when multiple data sources are used. Data analysis involves organizing, synthesizing, and generating patterns in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This analysis helped to interpret the data and develop findings. Constantly reviewing the data collection and performing a quick analysis to revamp, regroup, and prepare for the next stage of data collection ensured validity.

The school district's promotion policy was reviewed for key policy terms and an understanding of the policy. The statistics of students retained and rationed over the past 3 years were compared between the number of SWD and non-disabled students and between schools. This documentation was also used as reference for interviews. After interviews were completed, they were transcribed, and if any statements were unclear or required further explanation, follow-up interviews were conducted. All follow-up interviews and initial interviews were coded to identify similarities and differences across job titles and schools. Open coding was used throughout this process. Statements, phrases, and key words from the interviews were given broad categories and named. Then, the statements and phrases were compared to one another to determine which belonged together (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) through axial coding. Themes were reviewed and arranged by school and job title for additional similarities and differences.

Memo notes were made throughout each interview during and after the coding process. These memo notes helped to organize comparable thoughts, questions, patterns, and identify overarching themes. The coding and memoing process allowed me to identify four prevalent

themes found throughout the interviews: experience, power, accountability, and knowledge.

After the themes were identified, they were analyzed to determine how each theme influenced the principal's interpretation of the policy. As a result, subheadings for each theme evolved.

Street-level bureaucracy and loose coupling theories was used as a framework for this research. As stated in Chapter 2, street-level bureaucracy is grounded in the use of available resources, challenge to authority, and vague expectations as a basis for decision-making. The street-level bureaucracy theory was used as a framework to apply themes, draw conclusions, and implications. Finally, the organizational structure from the loosely coupled theoretical framework was used to develop implications.

Limitations and Strengths

This study had limitations due to the location and scope of the study. The research concentrated on the third grade co-teaching inclusion team in three elementary schools in one school district. The research did not include all elementary schools or all teachers in the elementary schools studied. The promotion policies are different for the elementary and secondary school levels; as a result, secondary schools were not included in this study. The high school promotion policy is strongly determined by credits and verified credits as a pathway to graduation. Therefore, the secondary curriculum and graduation implications would force the study in a direction outside of the scope of principal interpretation and implementation.

Narrowing the focus of the research allowed me to focus attention on a specific group of schools and principals. The study is a fair and valid comparison of schools in the district. It included one school from each sector of the school district, so it could be representative of neighboring schools. The study also provided several perspectives within the hierarchy of the school district. For this reason, the principal's interpretation and implementation is not only

viewed through the lens of the principal, but teachers, assistant principals, and central office staff as well.

Role of the Researcher

I was employed in the school district studied for 23 years as a high school general education teacher, an assistant principal, and the Supervisor of Instruction for Special Education. At the conclusion the study, I was the Coordinator of Special Education and Transition Services in a district within another region of the state. I have had experience in both ends of the policy spectrum as a school administrator and district leader; this includes policy development, interpretation, and implementation. As a result, district policy interpretation and implementation is of great interest to me. Research in this area will provide me with a stronger understanding of policy; and it will allow me to grow in my role as a district leader and principal support. All research, interviews, observations, and data collection from this study was used for the sole purpose of this Dissertation. Information and data gathered for this study did not impact my employment or the interviewee's employment. Each participant reviewed and signed a Conflict of Interest Disclosure form prior to their interview.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Our current accountability system suggests innovative ways that school districts and principals can maintain standards and improve proficiency. Grade retention has been used as a remediation tool (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2017) and a deterrent of high stakes testing failure. The emphasis on accountability in our current education system has increased the role of the principal. Principals are not only tasked with developing inventive regulations and procedures for their schools, but also interpreting and implementing district policy. The high failure rate and poor performance of SWD on high stakes testing (Tavassolie & Winsler, 2017) has caused principals to concentrate on this subgroup. Regardless of the intention of the policy, the interpretation and implementation will determine its success, implications, and outcomes.

Policies involving SWD are vague as a result of the individualization of the student's education plan. SWD are a vulnerable subgroup with many state and federal protections, therefore, principals should be cautious and informed when interpreting and implementing policy for this group. The results of the principal's interpretation and implementation of SWD policy can have serious monetary and legal implications for the school district. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that contribute to the principal's interpretation and implementation of the school district's promotion policy for SWD. This study focuses on those SWD who are assessed by state standardized assessment programs. This group is not comprised of the 1% of the federally defined SWD population assessed by alternative assessments. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What factors influence principal interpretation of promotion policies for students with disabilities?

2. How do principals influence their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities?
3. How do principals implement their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities within their schools?

This chapter begins with a descriptive overview of the study's school setting. The district and school settings are important in developing context for the principal's interpretation and implementation of policy. Setting provides the reader with an understanding of the demographics of the school and the principal. Next, the reader will be provided with a review of the school district's promotion policy, which includes the policy for SWD. The chapter, then addresses within-school analysis findings that will discuss policy interpretation and implementation at each school. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of a comparable school analysis and concluding thoughts.

District Setting and Promotion Policy

Tayden City school district has a rich Virginian history and tradition. The city's historical roots date back to 1608 with colonial exploration and trading along a major river. Geographically and culturally, the city is divided into the northern, central, and southern regions. The northern region is the most urban and developed part of the city; it also touches two metropolitan neighboring Virginia cities. Many historic buildings, city government, and lower income homes are located in the downtown, central, region. Finally, the southern region is the largest area with the smallest population. Vast with farmland and fields, it reaches parts of North Carolina.

The school district is also divided into these three regions with three high schools (grades 9-12), five middle schools (grades 6-8), and 11 elementary schools (PreK-5), one Alternative

school (grades 6-12), and one Vocational school (grades 10-12). Each high school is located in one region of the city. This study includes Westpoint Elementary school located in the northern region, Stonebridge Elementary located in the central region, but feeding into the secondary schools in the central and southern regions; and Oakbrook Elementary located on the southern end of the northern region, and feeding into the northern and central schools.

As of September 30, 2018, the school district reported an enrollment of 14,265 students that includes 1,880 (13.2%) students with disabilities. The elementary student enrollment is 6,857 with a SWD population of 10%. Students are supported by 1,144 professional staff and 844 support staff. Demographically, the school district is diverse; with a student population of 55% Black/African American, 32% White, 6% Hispanic, 5% self-identified Multi-ethnic, 2% Asian, and 50.81% Eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals. The Federal Graduation Indicator is 83% compared to the state's 87% rate. In addition, the Federal Graduation Indicator for SWD is 45% compared to the state average of 54%.

School District's Elementary Promotion Policy

The purpose of this section is to give the reader an overview of the Tayden City School District's elementary promotion policy. Promoted students have met the requirements of the promotion policy, while retained students have not met the requirements. Rationing is an obscure term written in the promotion policy, but it is not explained. The Director of Elementary Leadership explains that a rationed student is a

child [who] may not have made all components [of the promotion policy] but we always ask . . . Is it in the child's best interest to be retained or not? ...if retention is not the answer then they are rationed.

Rationaling may not be explained in the promotion policy, but it is discussed when promotion/retention is decided. The Director of Elementary Leadership further explained, “even though the student’s report card reads ‘promoted’, students who are rationaled are tracked for remediation and future retention purposes.” Rationaling only occurs on the elementary level.

Tayden City School District’s K-5 promotion policy reads as follows:

- A. [The School District] complies with the State Board of Education’s Standards of Quality and Standards of Accreditation. Promotion will be based on achievement. Decisions as to whether one should promote or retain a student will be based on the knowledge of those adults working closest with the student in the educational setting. Whenever educational evaluations are available, these will be used in determining whether a student is promoted or retained. For SWD, consideration shall be given to the impact of their disability on academic performance.
- B. Except in cases where the school superintendent recommends student promotion based on rationale determined by the district, the promotion criteria must be met. [The School District] shall use multiple criteria which include, but are not limited to, the following: (i) successful completion of core coursework, (ii) achieving proficiency on local and/or State-mandated assessments in literacy and numeracy in grades K-8; (iii) successful completion of minimum verified credits in grades 9-12, and (iv) meeting the requirements of the districts attendance policy to determine a student’s promotion status
- C. The school superintendent shall develop regulations for promotion of students enrolled in [The School District]. (Issued July 11, 2014) (The School District, 2017, p.31)

A student achieves proficiency on local assessments by obtaining 70% on the final local assessment (benchmark assessment) or a 70% average on all “local Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments designed to measure students’ achievements throughout the year” (The School District, 2017, p. 29). High stakes testing and accountability measures are discussed in the promotion policy, but the reference to the promotion of SWD promotion is vague. SWD are general education students first, but exceptions can be made based on “consideration . . . to the impact of their disability on academic performance.” (The School District, 2017, p. 31).

Within-School Analysis

Data analysis revealed four key factors that influence how principals interpret district policy in their school. These four factors are knowledge, power, accountability, and experience. This section will address how these factors influenced the principal’s interpretation of policy in each of the schools studied. First, knowledge provides the principal with an understanding of the pedagogy and educational issues necessary for decision-making and policy interpretation. Power determines the amount of control the principal has in policy interpretation. Clear policies, procedures, and expectations allows the principal to hold staff accountable for policies. Finally, a principal’s tenure in the role gives them the time to understand the consequences and resources involved in interpreting policy

Westpoint Elementary

Principal Vaughan has served as Westpoint Elementary school’s principal for 2 years; however, she has been a principal for 10 years in the district. She has also served as an assistant principal and a district science specialist. Mrs. Vaughan was the most experienced principal in the study. In addition to principal experience, she had district level experience, which helped her develop a collaborative environment built on trust and support. This section will discuss how

she used her knowledge, power, accountability, and experience to influence and support her staff.

Westpoint Elementary School is the second most northern school in the district. It has a strong military population influenced by businesses and neighboring cities, and the school is fully accredited. As of September 30, 2018, they had a student enrollment of 767 with a SWD population of 10.6%. Fifty-four teachers support both general education and special education students. 60.4% of the student population is African American, 23.9% Caucasian, 6.1% Hispanic, 7.6% two or more races, and 1.8% Asian. 7.6% of the student population receives Free and Reduced lunch.

Table 2:

Westpoint Elementary Participants

Participant Name	Participant's Title	Years of Experience in the District	Years of Experience in Current Role
Mrs. Vaughan	Principal	24	10
Ms. Covington	Assistant Principal	8	2
Ms. Wells	General Education Teacher	10	10
Ms. Fields	Special Education Teacher	6	4

Principal Vaughan was not only the most experienced principal, but she was also the most knowledge of the district's promotion policy. She casually discussed the historical changes in the district's policy, and explained the policy was "open to interpretation." She furthered defined the policy,

You have to be passing all core content areas, you can't be flat out failing reading or math. That's what we look at first, and then, of course, if you fail in social studies, writing or science that factors in. But of course, we're looking really strongly at reading

and math. If you're averaging out to an F at the end of the year . . . that holds in my opinion, based on my experiences more weight than anything. And then, we have the benchmark as a part of the promotion policy. A lot of other districts don't have this, but we do. Students need a 70% for reading and a 70% for math, or they can pass the SOL test, if they're in grades three, four, and five.

She was knowledgeable of the policy, but she also relied on district leadership to educate her teachers. She explained,

I do believe the policy is gone over in pre-service whenever it has changed. It should be gone over every year . . . but I'm not sure because I was not in the pre-service meetings with the teachers. Also, we didn't have any major changes this year, so I don't know if they did talk about the promotion policy.

District leadership, however, did not provide the training that the principal expected. The general education teacher, Ms. Fields, who attended the pre-service meetings explained, "The promotion policy was never discussed at the pre-service meetings. The policy is in the handbook, but most teachers do not read that." Ms. Smalls, the special education teacher, agreed that the policy was not discussed at pre-service, and added, "we don't meet frequently to make sure we understand the promotion policy, we talk more about students that we need to target so they can be promoted."

Principal Vaughan did not feel the need to educate her teachers on the policy because she relied on her own understanding in decision making. She was comfortable with her own level of knowledge, and her staff supported her in her knowledge. Principal Vaughan explained,

I have been in the district for 24 years. I served as a fourth grade classroom teacher for nine years, and then I was the district's first science lead teacher for five years. And then,

I served as the assistant principal at one school for one year. Then I was a principal for eight years. Now, this is my second year here. So, I can tell you what the policy states, and I can tell you how it's interpreted across different levels. I've been through the many changes and I know how things really work.

The general education teacher, Ms. Fields, echoed the principal's confidence when she stated, I'm pretty comfortable with the policy myself. There might be a grey area here and there, but like I said, our principal is very open and available. She would rather us go to her than make the wrong decision; and I am very comfortable with her level of knowledge.

On the other hand, Ms. Smalls, special education teacher, was confused with what the policy meant. She admitted,

I'm a little confused . . . I know they have to get a certain number on the assessment. And I know it's based off of a growth model, but I'm not sure. I'm a bit biased because I deal with special education. I rely on the general education teacher to bring the rest of the input.

The assistant principal, Ms. Covington, quickly expressed her uneasy feeling about the district's promotion policy, as she explained,

I'm not comfortable. I may know what the policy is, but then sometimes I get more information or other things occur, and I become unsure. I only know what the policy is by reading it, but no one has really explained it. Last year we went over it right before retention meetings, but we didn't go into depth. I guess it was just an overview.

Additional professional development and training was not discussed, even though, the assistant principal and special education teacher were unsure about the details of the district's

promotion policy. Each participant did, however, feel comfortable relying on the principal for her knowledge and understanding of the policy.

Principal Vaughan was knowledgeable of the district's policies, but she still relied on district leadership as a valid source of information. She explained,

I don't hesitate in calling [They Special Education Department]. They come to our meetings. They share out with our coaches and our LEA's. They share at all the principal's meetings regarding what is expected. I think those meetings are good because, as a district, we can see K 12 promotion, retention, and qualifications.

She did not directly supervise the special education teachers; therefore, Principal Vaughan felt that she "did not have a need to attend these meetings". She explained the role of her assistant principal was to be the special education teacher's "direct supervisor, so she plans their meetings, and I just "pop in." Knowledge was an important resource, but the principal focused on expanding her teacher's knowledge instead of her expanding her own knowledge. She also empowered her assistant principal by having her to attend special education professional development and relay the information to the teachers.

At times, members from different departments in district leadership provided different guidance to principals. The mixed messages did not inconvenience Principal Vaughan. She stated,

The Teaching and Learning Department will advise us to put students with disabilities in self-contained classes when they are failing, but the Special Education Department will tell us to revise the IEPs, services, and accommodations.

Principal Vaughan was able to rely on the support from these departments without any confusion because she had a strong knowledge base. She used her knowledge to provide the teachers with the guidance and policy interpretation that she wanted.

I asked each participant at Westpoint Elementary school if the promotion policy is different for SWD, and each respondent explained that the policy focuses on IEP goals. Principal Vaughan clarified the difference in the promotion policy for SWD by stating, “You have to look at their IEP goals. . . As long as they are making progress towards their goals, they go on.” Assistant principal Covington defined the policy by saying,

Students with disabilities are required to meet their IEP goals. I don’t know if they are supposed to be meeting the same qualifications as other students to be promoted.

However, students with disabilities are promoted if they are meeting their IEP goals.

Then, if they’re not meeting their IEP goals, you have a revision to the IEP to make sure that they are meeting those goals and they can progress.

The general education teacher, Ms. Fields added to the explanation by stating,

If they meet the goals that are set in the IEP, then it cancels out everything else. If they’re not performing at the level that they can’t meet the 70% benchmark, but they’re meeting their goals; then we don’t look at retention.

Finally, special education teacher, Ms. Smalls gave a different explanation,

I don’t think there is a difference. I think the district takes into account if they have a disability. They look at their IEP goals; and the areas that they may be failing in. If they’re not meeting the goals in their IEP, then that falls back on the IEP team.

The assistant principal and the special education teacher were the least confident of the district’s policy for SWD. Principal Vaughan was the only participant that discussed making progress

towards IEP goal, while others discussed meeting IEP goals. Progress towards IEP goals and meeting IEP goals are different.

In addition, each respondent gave a different answer when asked “who determines if a student is meeting their IEP goals?” Principal Vaughan responded with the IEP team; Assistant Principal Covington said, “I’m not sure.” The general education teacher explained, “This is only my second year in inclusion, and that hasn’t happened yet. I guess the special education teacher.” Finally, the special education stated, “I give my input, but it’s a meeting among myself and the teachers.”

Principal Vaughan was also flexible in her decision-making, communication, and interpretation of policy. She was not bound to the policy; instead she considered the social preparedness of the child when determining promotion. She discussed a fourth grade 11 year old student in her school,

He does very well socially, but it’s not in his best interest to be retained, even though he is not meeting the promotion policy. He’s overage and he’s a bigger student. I mean taller than the average fourth grader. Keeping him in the 4th grade another year would not help him at all. It might actually make his behaviors worse.

She explained that she has retained students with disabilities “if it’s in their best interest. You do what’s in the child’s best interest. You have to look at the whole child and say, is it appropriate?”

She was also less rigid in her interpretation of the promotion policy, she told her teachers to “disregard the district’s grading of 70% being mastery for benchmarks; and look at a range.” She also wanted them to consider the grades in the class in comparison to the benchmark score to make a decision. She gave the following example,

Let's say they have a D because the D is passing, but they don't have the 70% on the benchmark? If a child made a 68 on the benchmark, we don't need to have angry parents in the building knowing that they're only two points away. Now, if the child has an F, and they made a 45 on the benchmark, boom, that child's going to get a letter.

The principal was proactive in her expectations and accountability. She monitored her expectations by reviewing every report card with her assistant principal and writing comments on each. She explained,

I would think it would be the expectation, but I have always done it. During the first nine weeks, [Ms. Covington] and I divide the report cards up. We write comments on them, we lay our eyes on every one of them, and we actually put the stickers on each report card. She did K-2 and I did 3-5; then we'll flip it. That way you have your eyes on all kids. Of course, she has her special education students because she probably knows the special education kids better than a lot of the others. You know, just because she's always constantly in meetings and learning them. But, you kind of know who your kids are. I will look at a kid, and can't believe he has an F because he is so smart. So, I make sure I have a conversation with the teacher because I need to know what is going on with the student and her grading.

A clear understanding of the policy will lead to clear expectations and accountability. Principal Vaughan was the most detailed principal in her expectations for retention letters. The teachers all had the same message, so letters were sent out with consistency. Furthermore, Principal Vaughan directed her teachers not to send the retention letters to the parents of SWD. Westpoint Elementary school was the only school who had this expectation.

Open communication was a key component of Westpoint Elementary. The principal created an atmosphere that was conducive to collaboration. She used several methods of communication to convey her values and interpretation of the policy. The special education teacher at Westpoint Elementary, Ms. Smalls stated,

We'll get an email; then we'll have a meeting about the email which is good because I can read it, but sometimes I need to hear it to really understand it . . . Emails are good, but an email doesn't mean that we understand what is written.

She understood that emails were only a supplement to communication, so she held grade level meetings to follow-up on her emails. Principal Vaughan stated,

I meet with teachers and we go over the pieces of the puzzle. We look at each subject and each student. We talk about what it means to meet district criteria and what my expectations are within that interpretation.

Emails and meetings were consistent forms of communication, but her main source of communicating with teachers was through personal conversations. She used her conversations and private meetings to influence the grading practices of her staff. Mrs. Vaughan discussed how these conversations allowed her to explain her expectations and decision making to teachers. Flexibility in grading was important to the principal, and she used intimate conversations with her teachers to explain this concept. Westpoint Elementary teachers also appreciated meeting with the principal. Mrs. Fields, the general education teacher, stated that "there might be a grey area here and there our principal is very open and available . . . she would rather us go to her then make the wrong decision. Principal Vaughan echoed these comments. She explained that although some policy issues are "common sense," she still has to have clarifying discussions with the teachers. She asks teachers,

Are you going to create a hornet's nest with your decision to retain a student? Especially, if it's a special education student. I want to make sure I have discussions with the teachers so they will understand that they need to look at what is in the best interest of the child. Everything is not about grades.

Mrs. Vaughan worked to build capacity in her staff by supporting their decisions with parents. She explained, "I always try to push [decisions] back, to the teacher because to me that's only fair." The teachers at Westpoint Elementary also discussed how open Mrs. Vaughan was to answering questions and guiding them through situations with parents and teachers. Ms. Covington, the assistant principal, explained that she was a new assistant principal and Mrs. Vaughan "met with me often and explained how the school and district works through procedures." Teachers and the assistant principal spoke of their confidence in Mrs. Vaughan's understanding of the district's promotion policy, and they trusted her interpretation and implementation.

Ms. Fields, the general education teacher, stated, "Our principal is always available. We can go to her whenever we need anything." Although the participants from Westpoint Elementary did not speak of specific training offered by the principal, each participant discussed the support they received from the principal. Principal Vaughan discussed this support when talking about inclusion classes,

I have some teachers begging to get some of the kids out of the other classroom because they are being disruptive or they are low academically. We also have successful inclusion settings. You have to find the right balance. You have to find the right special education teacher and the right general education teacher to make it work. And we take time to find the right matches. I don't put people together just because. I want to help

the teams be successful and work with them because that helps the teachers, the kids, everyone.

Principal Vaughan used her knowledge, power, expectations of accountability, and experience, to communicate her interpretation of policy. Teachers were more aware and supportive of her interpretation of the district's promotion policy.

Furthermore, her clear interpretation led to a detailed implementation of the policy. She explained her implementation as follows:

The first nine weeks' report cards have already gone out. Under each subject it will list reading and all those components of reading, and the last box under there says 'meeting district criteria'. If they have an F, there should be an X beside not meeting criteria, because you're not meeting it yet. If they didn't hit the 70% [on the benchmark], there should be an X too, because that's still part of the policy. When we get ready to send out the letters during the second nine weeks, we don't send letters to special education children. They would normally get a letter because they are not passing the benchmark, but if I'm going to rationale them anyway, then what's the point? I meet with teachers and we go over the pieces of the puzzle and in February. The second nine weeks is when we do letters. I tell my teachers to look at a range. Now the child has an F, and they made a 45 on the benchmark, boom, you're going to mark that box and that child's going to get a letter.

Oakbrook Elementary

Principal Clinton has worked in the district for 4 years. She was an assistant principal at Oakbrook Elementary School for the 3 years previous years of this study, and this was her first year as principal. Oakbrook Elementary School is the only school that Principal Clinton has

worked in during her tenure in Tayden School District. Prior to her years at Oakbrook Elementary, she was a fourth grade teacher in another region in the state. Ms. Clinton had the least principal experience and the least experience in the district. In addition to the lack of experience, she was the only principal who had all of her administrative experience in one school. This section will discuss how her inexperience affected her knowledge, power, accountability, and relationship with her staff. Oakbrook Elementary School had an environment that lacked trust and support.

Oakbrook Elementary shares aspects of the northern and central regions. It is the smallest and oldest school in this study. In 2017, Oakbrook Elementary school returned to Full Accreditation Status after two years of being Partially Accredited. As of September 30, 2018, they had a student enrollment of 497, with a student with disabilities population of 11.6%. Thirty-eight teachers support both general education and special education students. 49.9% of the student population is African American, 35% Caucasian, 6.2% Hispanic, 5.8% two or more races, and 2.6% Asian. 49.5 % of the student population receives Free and Reduced lunch.

Table 3:

Oakbrook Elementary Participants

Participant Name	Participant's Title	Years of Experience in the District	Years of Experience in Current Role
Ms. Clinton	Principal	4	1
Mrs. Coswell	Assistant Principal	12	3
Ms. Wells	General Education Teacher	2	2
Ms. Dodd	Special Education Teacher	2	2

Principal Clinton was a rookie principal and the least experienced principal. She was very detailed when she discussed the different parts of the district's policy. She explained,

There's several parts to it. The one that we normally don't really consider as retaining a child is the amount of absences they have. I believe it's twenty absences. If they have more than twenty absences, we have the option of not promoting them. We also are looking at their grades to see if they're failing any subjects. So the main ones we look at definitely are reading and math, but if there are multiples ones that's definitely an option for retention. And also, looking at the benchmark scores for the students. So they either need to have a 70 or above, or a 70% average on those, and also obviously looking at their SOL scores mainly in the year.

In addition, Principal Clinton explained that no one factor of the promotion policy was more important than the other. She did not “always agree with the benchmarks . . . we want to say that they're valid and reliable tests but that's not always the case. I'd rather look at not just the benchmarks, but the grades.”

When I interviewed the principal in December, she had not held meetings nor planned to meet with her teachers to discuss the promotion policy. She said that,

We meet during grade level meetings and I haven't yet, but I will give them a copy of the policy. I think for the most part they understand. I believe last year, they did. Several of the teachers have been here for a while, but I do have a lot of new teachers, so my plan is to meet with them.

The lack of information and training had a definite effect on her staff's knowledge. The general education teacher, Ms. Dodd, who is a veteran teacher, believed that she and her principal were comfortable with their understanding of the policy. On the other hand, Ms. Wells, a new special education teacher, had a differing opinion she stated,

Grades are averaged and [the policy is] based on the grades . . . and I think the SOL also plays a part, but I'm not sure. I'm not comfortable at all with the policy. . . I just realized how much I don't know.

Oakbrook's assistant principal, Ms. Coswell, was also unclear and unsure of the principal's understanding. She explained,

We look at grades, the state SOL scores (if they're 3rd through 5th grade), attendance, and I believe that's it. I don't know how the principal reviews promotion because she has not talked to me about it. I am not comfortable at all that she understands the policy.

In December when the interviews were completed, students were in the midst of being assessed by the district's promotion policy; however, Oakbrook Elementary School's teachers had not received clarity on the policy. Principal Clinton also had not planned any professional development sessions to educate the teachers. The special education teacher nor the assistant principal were comfortable with the principal's knowledge of the policy.

The principal relied on district leadership for knowledge and guidance. She explained, I feel like it's more one on one support, but as an LEA you need to be transparent enough to say, 'I don't think I can make this decision on my own. Can you help me?' I feel like they're going to give us the honest answer, from the third party perspective.

Principal Clinton appreciated the support from the Special Education Department when in the retention meetings because, "they talk to us about these kids and give us suggestions; like 'let's rationale this child but he needs to go to child study this summer.'" Furthermore, she discussed the department's support and training, by explaining, "The Special Education Department provides the training, support, and the documents. They're there to bounce questions off of and

give suggestions.” Principal Clinton was aware of the differing guidance from various departments from district leadership. She stated,

I often get different guidance on discipline. Other departments will suggest special education testing for students who are failing, but the Special Education Department are more cautious and they thoroughly discuss the Eligibility process.

Participants from Oakbrook Elementary recognized a difference in the promotion policy for SWD; however, they did not give the same interpretation of the policy. Principal Clinton did not reference the policy or the student’s IEP when she stated,

First of all, they shouldn’t be failing. They shouldn’t be making A's either because they're supposed to have some specialized instructions to help in those areas. We know the benchmarks and SOLs have high expectations, but we know realistically they won’t do well on them. If you've got a child that's ID [Intellectually Disabled] or SLD [Specific Learning Disability] with an IQ of 70, unfortunately, are they ever going to get it? But also, we need to look back at your instruction. Are we doing everything we need for the child? They shouldn’t be failing every subject.

Assistant principal Coswell did not believe the policy was different from non-disabled students, when she said, “No, not in my opinion. They're going to be passed quicker than anyone, just because they're special education.” General education teacher Dodd apologetically said, “I guess I never really thought about it.” Special Education teacher, Wells, flatly said, “No, I don't think it is [any difference]”. None of the participants at Oakbrook Elementary school could discuss any specifics in the district’s promotion policy or special education regulations. Principal Clinton stated the district’s promotion policy for SWD was open to interpretation; she did not

have the knowledge to interpret the policy clearly for her teachers. She also needed to seek guidance from other sources for knowledge and support of her teachers.

Ms. Clinton considered her personal feelings as a parent when reviewing promotion and retention. She stated,

When I have to make that decision, it's not all a bunch of data points, because as a parent failure is a hard pill to swallow. It's hard on a parent to tell them your child is being retained. Sometimes, the parent's input will sway me one way or the other if I'm on the fence about promotion and retention.

She also explained, "My directive to my teachers was to send the letter if a child had an F in the subject, and didn't pass the benchmark. I'm not just basing the letter off one benchmark test".

The teachers at Oakbrook Elementary were not educated on this directive. The special education teacher explained, "I am not a part of the discussions for sending out possible retention letters, so I rely on the general education teacher in her classroom."

Principal Clinton, performs many observations to ensure the teachers are providing specialized instruction for SWD because she wants "them to meet promotion criteria."

Furthermore, she explains that she "meets with [teachers], and I have had to do it multiple times, follow behind them, and double-check to make sure they understand the procedures for retention." Ms. Clinton set her expectations and held the teachers accountable for the instruction prior to the promotion/retention decisions. However, when retention decisions are made, she requires her teachers "to contact the parent, and [they] have to make phone or a face to face contact with the parent; and it can't be via email." Ms. Clinton believes that the expectation and accountability measures will help when she meets with the Director of Elementary Leadership to discuss the possible student retentions. The retention meeting with The Director of Elementary

Leadership is the final step in determining retention for students, since she reviews all of the elementary promotion, retention, and rationale decisions for the district.

Ms. Clinton spoke more about expectations and holding her teachers accountable, than she did about supporting her teachers. She set high expectations, but she did not offer much guidance. Inclusion was a contentious subject at Oakbrook Elementary. She explained, “[teachers] were coming around with acceptance . . . well, they don’t grumble to me. They know better than that.” The special education teacher also explained that Ms. Clinton was not helpful in supporting inclusion classes. She said, “She is very clear on what she wants and she is big on co-teaching. I’ll leave it at that. I don’t want to go on record talking about her lack of support.”

In contrast, Ms. Coswell, assistant principal at Oakbrook Elementary school stated,

I believe that [teachers] really, truly don't understand the value in [inclusion]. These classes aren't working well. My principal basically, tells [the teachers] what is told to her, and where it's coming from. You know, ‘you have to follow the law’, is what she says. She does not fully embrace this program.

Professional development and support were both lacking at Oakbrook Elementary. Principal Clinton did not have the skills to offer the training and support, so she relied district leadership. She stated,

[The Special Education Department] provides the training and support. They will ask why aren't we getting these kids into inclusion classes or what is the plan to get them into inclusion? They help us develop plans and support for the teachers.

Ms. Wells, the special education teacher, did not feel supported by her principal. She explained, “we don’t get any type of training when something new starts. She just tells us what to do.”

Mrs. Coswell, the assistant principal, said the principal did not give her nor the teachers guidance

in understanding the promotion policy. The year of the study was Mrs. Coswell's first year as an assistant principal at Oakbrook, and she explained, "I have no idea how retention was going to be determined for the students."

Ms. Wells explained the teachers receive emails, but special education teachers do not have follow-up conversations about the emails in the same manner as general education teachers. Principal Clinton preferred meetings because it allowed for dialogue between her and her teachers. Ms. Clinton, explained that she used her meetings to ensure her ideas; such as inclusion, were being carried out. Ms. Dodd, the general education teacher, described the meetings with Ms. Clinton by saying,

Ms. Clinton sits in on some of the meetings. She checks up to make sure that I'm comfortable as the inclusion teacher, and she makes sure my special education teacher is following along and helping. And she asks if I need more assistance. We meet regularly with her to discuss data, expectations, and what success looks like.

However, the special education teacher, Ms. Wells, gave a different perspective on the meetings,

As far as special education teachers, we're kind of out of the loop. This is why I really don't know a whole a lot about the policy. I know the teachers come together towards the end of the year, and I guess a lot of information is gathered then, and they'll make a decision. But, like I said we're especially we're out of the loop.

In contrast, the assistant principal at Oakbrook Elementary was very hesitant to have personal communications with the principal. She explained, "We have had issues in the past. I don't trust her with private conversations. I need to have a witness to our conversations." Principal Clinton explained that she prefers meeting in groups and sending email for documentation purposes versus personal conversations.

Principal Clinton's interpretation of the promotion policy for SWD is reflected in her implementation:

We send teachers a Google doc or Word document. They put all the kids on the document that are a possible retention or who are not meeting requirements. We track them and we keep a list of them. We make notes on what they need to be doing, and the interventions we are providing them. And then we look the list over . . . we send the letters home, but we'd let the parents know if they didn't meet that criteria for the benchmarks for the third nine weeks; they would get a letter . . . My directive to my teachers was that if a child had an F in the subject an X should be there [for possible retention]. Then we meet during grade level meetings and they talk about the students. And at that point, we say 'Okay, you've got to contact this parent,' . . . You have to make phone or a face to face contact with the parent before it goes home with them with the report card. And it can't be via email. It has to be over the phone or face to face.

Stonebridge Elementary

Principal Mayo served in the district for 10 years. She has worked in several elementary schools during her tenure in Tayden School district in the capacity of general education teacher, academic coach, and assistant principal. However, all of her 4 years as principal has been at Stonebridge Elementary School. This section will discuss how Principal Mayo used her experience throughout the district to influence and develop expectations her staff. Principal Mayo created an environment of accountability and high expectations.

Stonebridge Elementary School is centrally located in the district and enrolls students from both the southern and central regions. The school is a fully accredited school. Tayden School district's September 30th Fall Membership count reflected that Stonebridge had an

enrollment of 771 students with a SWD population of 11.5%. Fifty teachers support both general education and special education students. 60.4% of the student population is African American, 23.9% Caucasian, 6.1% Hispanic, 7.6% two or more Races, and 1.8% Asian. 47.6% of the student population received Free and Reduced lunch.

Table 4:

Stonebridge Elementary Participants

Participant Name	Participant's Title	Years of Experience in the District	Years of Experience in Current Role
Mrs. Mayo	Principal	11	4
Mrs. Highsmith	Assistant Principal	1	1
Ms. Powell	General Education Teacher	9	9
Mrs. Franklin	Special Education Teacher	27	27

Principal Mayo understood the district's promotion policy, and she was uneasy with its contents, she stated, "I don't know how to feel about the policy . . . but I'm a rule follower." Her explanation of the district's promotion shallow when she described,

[Students] have to have at least a 70% on the English and Math benchmark a 70% average . . . another criteria is passing on the report card which is a 60. Typically, they look at Reading and Math, attendance is a part of it but not really, and the SOL scores. They need to have that passed in Reading and Math or pass the SOL with a 400.

She added to her explanation of the policy by stating,

If [the students] pass the SOL they usually will go ahead and move along. . .I think the SOL test is a basic minimum test, so I didn't know how much I feel about, I mean I guess, that I don't like retaining kids.

Ms. Mayo was more involved than the other two principals in ensuring that her teachers were knowledgeable of the district's promotion policy. She explained,

I hold monthly meetings with each grade level. We talk about the students, and what they have to do to get their grades and up and pass. But in order for me to have that discussion, I need to make sure they understand what is needed to pass or be retained.

The general education and special education teachers agreed with the effectiveness of the meeting with the principal, but they were inaccurate in their description of the district's promotion policy. Ms. Franklin, the general education teacher, said, "We also look at their age." Mrs. Powell, the special education teacher, agreed by stating, "Many kids can't be retained because of their age. I think three years." When I showed the teachers the district's promotion policy, they were surprised that the policy did not include age. Ms. Franklin stated, "We were always told that."

Stonebridge Elementary school's assistant principal, Mrs. Highsmith, was honest in her lack of understanding of the promotion policy. She explained,

Students need to pass the SOL of the course. They need to pass reading and math with a 60 or better. They also need to pass benchmarks with a 70. I'm not sure about any other parts; this is my first year here.

Principal Mayo used her meetings as the main source of educating her teachers on the promotion policy; however, the teachers could not accurately explain the contents of the policy. The general education teacher, special education teacher, and assistant principal displayed a lack of understanding of the promotion policy. However, each of them agreed that they were comfortable with Principal Mayo's understanding and knowledge of the policy

Special Education knowledge was not the principal's forte. She understood her limitations, she explained that she "is not an expert" in special education. However, instead of acquiring more knowledge about special education, she relied on her experiences and her assistant principal. She discussed her time constraints; she did not have the time to attend the professional development. The contradictory guidance from the members of district leadership, was frustrating for her since she relied on them so heavily. She explained, "It's such a small district; everybody should kind of have a grasp on everything, but everybody's in their little lane."

Participants from the school did not have a unified description of the promotion policy for SWD. Principal Mayo did not recognize a difference in the policy for SWD. She stated,

I don't think there is anything in black and white for student with disabilities as far as I know. But, [at my school] if the student's making progress on their IEP goals, then it is a factor that we take into consideration. I'm looking at growth. I think that is an unwritten factor in the district, but I'm not a hundred percent sure.

Assistant Principal Highsmith echoed the principal's idea of growth when she said,

With students with disabilities, we're looking at a different level performance. We're looking at growth measures. We're looking at how they're progressing along their goals. We're looking to see if they're making any type of progress.

The teachers, on the other hand, had a different description. General education teacher Franklin stated, "We look at the IEP goals and see where they are. I feel like we have a good understanding of the students, and we know if they need another year." Special Education teacher Powell also discussed goals. She said,

We're looking at the mastery of the IEP goals. Also, it ties into their regular education work as well. Even though they may be lower on their reading skills, they still have to pass the grade level curriculum.

Administrators and teachers had a different focus in the policy. Administrators discussed growth, while teachers discussed IEP goals and grades.

Principal Mayo referred to the background of the student when determining retention. She justified her decisions by describing her diverse population and large low-income population. She explained,

I do try to look at the whole child. Some kids you have to retain, otherwise they are just going to fall through the cracks. And to me that's a last resort because you should be able to make progress with kids. The most important factor for me is the growth of the student.

She also tried to influence her teachers' empathic understanding when grading. Regarding homework, she stated,

If I hear another person tell me that the kid is failing because they don't do homework, I'm going to scream. Many of my students have difficulty completing work at home because of the environment. I'm not going to retain them because of homework. I just need for my teachers to stop giving kids zeros for not doing the homework.

In addition, Principal Mayo was not in favor of retention because she believed "there's been a lot of retentions at this school, but it's going to be less this year because it just doesn't work. I don't see the data that shows that retaining works." The high average of rationales at Stonebridge Elementary each year illustrates her disagreement with retention.

Similar to Principal Vaughan, Principal Mayo espoused similar values regarding

promoting SWD. Principal Vaughan discussed “the whole child” and Principal Mayo discussed “the best interest of the child”; both of these values focused on the student instead of the data.

Inclusion is a concept driven by values. All participants in this study agreed with the concept of inclusion; however, the concept’s support varied. Mrs. Highsmith, the assistant principal explained,

I actually find that [teachers] are very accepting of inclusion here in this building.

They're very open to it and we have some pretty strong inclusion teams. That is due to the principal’s belief that they are all your students and you teach these babies and meet the needs of the students. On average, our students do well in these classes, so we are not afraid to place students in the inclusion setting if they are ready.

Principal Mayo had a different concept of support. She discussed support as a priority; however, she explained her struggles when trying to offer support. She explained,

It’s very hard [to support] because I’m doing too much work that I don’t have time . . .

I’m stretched to the max. I’m not an expert in special education and it’s hard to change the mindset of the teachers especially when it comes to changing the IEPs when the students are not making progress.

Moreover, she explained,

Teachers need to learn how to do instruction better the first time. I’ll go in the gradebook to do a random check; and I’m surprised at what I see. If we could just get instruction right, we would not have to worry about a lot of the small things with the promotion policy.

Principal Mayo understood the need for training and support, and expected district leadership to train her teachers. However, she explained several times that the district did not offer enough

professional development and support to her teachers. The lack of district leadership support was a main source of conflict for the principal. She did not discuss the support that she offered to the teachers. The general and special education teachers both agreed, “Some training is done through email; but [we] don’t have any real support from administration.”

Principal Mayo used her meetings as a source of support and providing information. Stonebridge Elementary was more inclusive with their meetings than the other schools in this study. Principal Mayo explained

I meet with the teachers one on one. It's to tell them what I'm expecting when we come to our retention meetings the next time we meet. I need for them to have all information of what I expect.

Ms. Mayo also discussed her personal conversations with teachers; however, she discussed the difficulty in having these one on one conversations. She stated,

I'm constantly informing and talking with the teachers and the best way for me to do it is to catch something wrong. I hate to say that, but I have to -- they don't give us enough help on the elementary level. I have almost 800 kids I don't have enough time to meet with everyone individually.

Meetings provided adequate information; however, her teachers had a different opinion regarding the retention meetings. Teachers complained that they received no guidance on how to notify parents of possible retentions. Therefore, the teachers relied solely on the district’s promotion policy. The general education teacher stated the principal told them to “pull out the ones that are not meeting promotion. We pull those students, and we go through them, then red flag missing two or more of the criteria points.”

Accountability was important to the principal. She was accountable to the district leadership, and she developed strict expectations to hold her teachers accountable. She requires her teachers to provide proof of their retention decisions. She explained that teachers “could say anything they want, but they have to have the proof to back it up. So ultimately it’s my decision.” Ms. Mayo held her teachers accountable with expectations because she is also accountable to central office leadership. She further explained,

Appeals usually stop at me. . . I have really good relations with my parents, so they usually are good, but [some] will go downtown and complain to Central Office to get their child promoted.

Ms. Mayo was able to use the teacher’s information to make decisions and justify actions to district leadership, on the other hand, the teachers felt left out of the process. Ms. Franklin, the general education teacher said,

I felt like I was moving through an assembly line. The principal asked for all of this documentation, we spent time getting it ready, but she didn’t even take the time to talk with us about it. She and the assistant principal just looked at it and said ‘okay’. We didn’t have any real input.

Principal Mayo implements the promotion policy for SWD as follows:

Look at the data to see if the child is really progressing; if there is improvement on their benchmarks . . . the kids with IEPs should be showing growth. . . Go back and change the IEP and review IEP goals. Students should be meeting their IEP goals. . . I meet with the teachers one on one. . . . The meetings are to tell them what I’m expecting when we come to our retention meetings. . . We send out letters for students who are not meeting the promotion criteria. Then, the next time we meet, I need to have all

information, [they] need to bring proof of what you're saying. . . ultimately it's my decision and then, I send my decisions to my supervisor and ultimately they do their thing.

Comparative Principal Analysis

Knowledge as a Resource

Knowledge, as a resource, benefits the principal in interpreting the district's promotion policy. Professional development and district leadership were the main sources of the principal's and staff knowledge. The principals relied on professional development and district leadership to provide them and their staff with knowledge. Knowledge, not only, served as a resource for the principal and staff, but it also ensured staff confidence. A principal's staff needs knowledge and an understanding of educational principles in order to receive and carry out the principal's interpretation. This section will discuss the dimension participant's knowledge. Moreover, the sources of knowledge and resulting staff confidence will be reviewed.

Principal Vaughan was the most knowledgeable of the district's promotion policy. Her strong knowledge and guidance on the policy generated confidence in the Westpoint Elementary staff. The staff was comfortable and supportive in her interpretation of the policy. Principal Mayo was the second most knowledgeable principal. She also disagreed and was hesitant on several parts of the policy. Her hesitation caused a much less detailed interpretation of the policy; therefore, she was not able to provide a detailed interpretation of the policy. The least knowledgeable principal was Principal Clinton. She was knowledgeable on the different components of the promotion policy, but she did not have the depth of knowledge to explain her interpretation. The staff at Oakbrook Elementary School was uneasy with Principal Clinton's knowledge of the policy.

Principals at each school expected the IEP team to review the student's IEP if retention was possible. The IEP team considers IEP goal proficiency and/or progress in promotion consideration. In addition to the general education teacher, the LEA and the special education teachers are required participants of the IEP team. Assistant principals (LEAs) and special education teachers, in this study, were the least knowledgeable on the district's promotion policy. General education teachers provide the primary instruction to SWD in inclusion classes; however, the special education provides the services and monitors or case manages the IEP. As a result, the general education teacher depends on her knowledge of the promotion policy for instructional purposes. However, the assistant principal and the special education teacher rely on their knowledge of promotion policy for IEP development and revision consideration.

Tayden City School District offers many opportunities for the staff and administrators to participate in professional development and trainings. The Director of Special Education explained, "We offer them PD, but we can't make them go. The principals run the building, and I am not their supervisor. If they don't make the teachers attend these sessions, that's more problems for them." The Director of Elementary Leadership stated,

Central office staff needs to do a really good job of making sure this [professional development] is going on from September to June . . . teachers need that support and training as well. But, Principals have to make sure that teachers understand policy in their school, if policy is going to be followed.

District leadership was aware of the need for professional development. The Director of Elementary Leadership further explained, "You can talk to them and they say they understand . . . but when you really look at the policy and practices [there are discrepancies]". District

leadership was aware of the professional development needs, but they did not mandate new learning take place.

Principals discussed the professional development offered by the Special Education Department; however, none of them attended the professional development themselves. The principals sent their assistant principals as school representatives to the trainings. Principal Vaughan at Westpoint Elementary focused on expanding her teacher's knowledge instead of her expanding her own knowledge. She relied on her assistant principal to obtain special education knowledge and relay the information to the teachers. Principal Mayo, Stonebridge Elementary, explained that she "is not an expert" in special education. However, instead of acquiring more knowledge about special education, she relied on her experiences and her assistant principal. She explained that her time is limited; she could not attend professional development. Principal Clinton, at Oakbrook Elementary, on the other hand, explained,

I feel like it's more one on one support, but as an LEA you need to be transparent enough to say, 'I don't think I can make this decision on my own. Can you help me?' I feel like they're going to give us the honest answer, from the third party perspective.

Professional development was a not primary source of knowledge for the principals; they preferred guidance from district leadership. Principal Vaughan referenced her assistant principal as her proxy in attending trainings, and Principal Mayo discussed her lack time. Meanwhile, Principal Clinton focused on the assistance that district leadership could offer to her. The principals did not have an interest in theoretical or practical concepts or educational principles that would improve their knowledge.

Principals viewed district leadership as a primary resource. District leadership offered principals guidance and solutions to temporary problems. However, principals overlooked the

benefit of seeking knowledge rooted in theory, pedagogy, and practice. The principals needed professional development that provided them with knowledge that could translate to different situations. In addition, this knowledge could have helped the principals build the capacity in their staff.

During the interviews, the principals discussed mixed messages provided by the Teaching and Learning Department and the Special Education Departments. The principal's reliance on the district leadership was a reflection of their knowledge. Principal Vaughan had the strongest knowledge base; thus, she rely on the support of these departments without any confusion. The varied messages frustrated Principal Mayo because she relied heavily on the support from the departments. Finally, Principal Clinton's limited knowledge caused her to relay all messages to her teachers, which left the teachers confused.

Increased Power-Decreased Challenge to Authority

Principals draw upon their own personal beliefs or set them aside when interpreting policy. A principal's values are particularly relevant in decision making for the vulnerable SWD population. Power is derived from the values, influence, and staff support the principal holds, which affects their challenge to authority. The principals in this study had varying levels of power; as a result, teachers were either confident and supportive of their principal or uncomfortable and distrustful. This section will address the principal's values and influence, and the resulting staff support and degree of power.

Inclusion is a practice that requires the inclusive values and support of the principal. The assistant principals at Westpoint and Stonebridge Elementary schools were positive when discussing the inclusion practices in their schools, and they credited that to their principals. The inclusiveness that the principals helped to create a collaborative environment within the two

schools. Conversely, the assistant principal at Oakbrook Elementary was skeptical of inclusion and its implementation. She also attributed her skepticism her principal, Principal Clinton. Principal Clinton did not have a personal belief in inclusion; therefore, the support and implementation for the concept was poor.

The principal's values affect the placement of SWD in these classes, their academic success, and promotion. SWD who are assessed by standardized assessments are generally placed in the general education setting. This placement is important because it will affect the rigor and specialization of standardized content. The staff's perspective of the principal's values can determine the level of support the staff gives to the principal. Staff at Oakbrook Elementary were not supportive of the principal's values; therefore, they did not support or empower her. On the other hand, staff at Westpoint and Stonebridge Elementary Schools were supportive of the inclusive environments that their teachers created. For this reason, principals at Westpoint and Stonebridge had more power and less challenge to authority than did Principal Clinton at Oakbrook Elementary.

This study revealed that principals used emails, personal communications, and meetings to influence their teachers on their policy interpretation. Email is the least effective mode of communication, and it is only 7% as effective as talking (Van Praet, 2014). Teachers at all schools explained that email was an important method for communicating the principal's ideas on the promotion policy. Although email was the most widely used method of communication, each principal used email differently.

Principal Vaughan used email to supplement her main form of communication, which was personal conversations. Teachers were more aware and supportive of her interpretation of the district's promotion policy because they were able to individually engage through personal

conversations with the principal. Principal Vaughan used regular meetings with her teachers as her secondary form of communication for influencing teachers. Principal Mayo used meetings as her main form of communication. The teacher at Stonebridge Elementary benefitted from more physical and talking communication; however, the meetings did not offer the one on one personal communication that provides for the deeper communication necessary (Van Praet, 2014). Principal Clinton's main source of influence of the promotion policy was through email. This online communication created an environment giving "rise to completely different standards of trustworthiness" (Van Praet, 2014). As a result, the teachers at Oakbrook Elementary were the least informed and influenced on the principal's interpretation. Principal Clinton had the least amount of power and the greatest challenge to the authority. The teachers did not empower or support their principal; therefore, she experienced more challenge to her authority.

Accountability resolves Vague Expectations

Clear policies allows the principal to explain expectations and accountability methods to staff. Accountability can build support and power for the principal. The principals at each school held their teachers to varying degrees of accountability. Participants from each elementary school explained different levels of accountability, which was reflective of the policy clarity and expectations the principal required. This section will review how principals clarified policies and expectations and established a wide spectrum of accountability.

The district's promotion policy was composed of several vague phrases. The vague phrases as documented previously in Chapter 4 included; "For SWD, consideration shall be given to the impact of their disability on academic performance" and "Student promotion based on rationale determined by the district". Principals interpreted each of these phrases differently

for their schools. The interpretation of each of these vague phrases contributed the principal's level of accountability.

Principals chose to focus on different parts of the policy and ignore others. Principals Vaughan and Mayo focused on benchmark assessments and grades in the Reading and Math classes. On the other hand, Principal Clinton felt the benchmark assessments were not valid, so she focused more on grades. However, she also wanted to concentrate on attendance, even though, that was not widely accepted. Principals Vaughan and Mayo focused on IEP goals when clarifying the "For SWD, consideration shall be given to the impact of their disability on academic performance"; however, Principal Clinton left the policy "open to interpretation." Consequently, Principals Vaughan and Mayo provided more guidance and clarity to the vague expectations of the policy for SWD. Both principals gave direction about the IEP goals in alignment with IDEA.

Rationale is a term included in the district's promotion policy, but it is not defined. The Director of Elementary Leadership explained how students who were rationaled did not meet the district's promotion policy; and

It is not in the child's best interest to be retained...if retention is not the answer, then they are rationaled. They are not meeting a promotional criteria, but professionally and educationally, we believe that we have enough supporting systems in place that the child will be successful as they move forward. We don't want to set anyone up for failure.

Many elementary students across the district were promoted through the practice of rationalizing. Table 5 displays the number of students in each school studied that were retained and rationaled. The rationaled students did not meet the district's promotion policy criteria, but they were not retained as the "retained" students were. The principals recommended rationalizing

because retention was not in the student's best interest. Table 5 shows that an average of 64% more students were rationaled versus retained at Oakbrook Elementary each year over the three-year period. Stonebridge Elementary had an average of 78% more of their students rationaled than retained, and Westpoint Elementary had an average of 64% more students rationaled versus retained. Furthermore, 14% of all students at Oakbrook Elementary are rationaled each year; 17% of all students at Stonebridge Elementary were rationaled, and 18% of all students at Westpoint Elementary school were rationaled each year.

Table 5:

School Participant (All Students) Retentions & Rationales 2015-2018

School	2015-2016		2016-2017		2017-2018		2017-2018
	Retention	Rationale	Retention	Rationale	Retention	Rationale	Total Students
Oakbrook Elementary	27	74	22	60	24	72	530
Stonebridge Elementary	26	140	28	152	32	98	792
Westpoint Elementary	41	130	28	15	20	102	959

Likewise, Table 6 presents data showing 78% more of SWD were rationaled versus retained at Oakbrook Elementary during the same three-year period. Stonebridge Elementary had an average of 93% more SWD were rationaled instead of retained, and Westpoint Elementary reported an average of 70% more SWD rationaled instead of retained.

Table 6:

School Participant SWD Retentions & Rationales 2015-2018

School	2015-2016		2016-2017		2017-2018		2017-2018
	Retention	Rationale	Retention	Rationale	Retention	Rationale	Total Students
Oakbrook Elementary	2	20	5	5	3	21	530
Stonebridge Elementary	1	40	4	40	3	26	792
Westpoint Elementary	9	24	5	5	3	28	959

The number of students rationaled at each elementary school in this study was consistently high over the three years studied. Participants, however, did not have a unifying definition of rationale, nor could they explain how it differs from promotion. Each participant was asked to explain the district's policy of rationaling students. Principal and general education teacher responses aligned with the Director of Elementary Leadership's explanation. However, none of the three assistant principals and two of the three special education teachers had a response. Rationaling is an obscure portion of the promotion policy that affects a large number of students; yet the principals had not properly educated their staff on the purpose or their interpretation of the policy.

A clear understanding of the policy will lead to clear expectations and accountability. Principal Vaughan at Westpoint Elementary was the most detailed principal in her expectations for retention letters. However, she did not have as many standards in place for holding her teachers accountable. She focused on support instead of accountability. Principals Mayo and Clinton were more detailed-oriented on holding their teachers accountable. They focused more on holding the teachers accountable instead of supporting them. The study should that

Principal's Vaughan and Mayo had the most degree of accountability and Principal Clinton has the least degree of accountability. The district has vague policies; but school also has unclear procedures for interpreting the policy.

The Dimension of Principal's Experience

Principals with more experience are able to establish clear policies and procedures because they have a stronger knowledge base. They have a greater understanding of policy, so they are able to define policies and procedures clearly. Staff support is the result of the principal's knowledge, power, and accountability. This section will discuss how the principal's experience influenced their use of knowledge, policy, and staff; as well as, policy implementation. Principals Vaughan, Mayo, and Clinton each had a different level of experience that resulted in the school environment. Principal Vaughan, a veteran principal, was clear in her explanation, but understood the flexibility of the policy. Principal Clinton, the rookie principal, was clear and detailed in her explanation. She was the only principal to explain the attendance provision of the policy. Principal Mayo's experience was the median of the three principals. Her explanation was vague, and she expressed her opposition on the policy. Her opposition, however, did not deter her from strictly following the policy.

Principal Vaughan was the most knowledgeable principal with her 10 years of principal experience. Principals with more experience are more confident in their decision-making due to their previous situations. Mrs. Vaughan was more flexible in her decision-making, communication, and interpretation of policy. Although Principal Vaughan served 10 years as a principal, she had been in the district for 24 years in several roles. These years provided her the resources and relationships within the district. She was able to develop a supportive and collaborative environment in her school where the teachers felt supportive and trustful.

On the other hand, principals with less experience; such as Principal Clinton with one year of experience, had trouble explaining her interpretation of the policies to her assistant principal and teachers. Principal Clinton spent time reviewing the policy; however, she did not have previous situations in which she had to interpret the policy. This left her with a shallow depth of knowledge and experiences. Therefore, it is also more difficult for her to establish clear policies and procedures. The staff at Oakbrook Elementary did not support or trust Principal Clinton because she was not knowledgeable and used ineffective communication methods. Principal Clinton's values and level of support created an atmosphere of distrust. Her values focused on parent opinions and control. Her teachers discussed how the principal told them what to do, instead of support them; thus, Principal Clinton had less power. Westpoint Elementary participants; on the other hand, felt supported by Principal Vaughan. Principal Vaughan did not depend on these departments to add to her depth of knowledge or support her staff; she was self-assured in offering the support that she felt her teachers needed.

Each principal had varying levels of dependence on the assistant principal, and they gave differing levels of support to their assistant principal. All three assistant principals were serving in a new role in their school during the year of the study. Both Principal Vaughan and her assistant principal, Ms. Covington, spoke in depth about their collaboration with students and sharing information. Mrs. Vaughan understood the importance of including Ms. Covington in training and decision-making. She was proud to say that Ms. Covington, "probably knows the special education kids better than a lot of the others just because she's always constantly in meetings and learning them." As a result, the principal gave Ms. Covington great latitude in decision-making with SWD. In contrast, both assistant principals from Stonebridge and Oakbrook Elementary schools explained that they had little training or guidance from the

principal regarding the promotion policy for SWD. Fortunately, the assistant principal at Stonebridge Elementary had been an assistant principal in another district, so she was knowledgeable with the IDEA requirements for SWD. Mrs. Coswell, the assistant principal, at Oakbrook Elementary was an assistant principal for one year at another school in the district; therefore, she had limited knowledge based on her previous experiences. The experience of the principal not only broadened their scope of understanding and decision-making, but it also allowed them to recognize resources and support others.

The principals' experience also shown through in their implementation of the policy. Principals interpret the policy by influencing the teachers in understanding and adhering to their interpretation. The teachers, in return, assist in implementing the policy based on their understanding of the principal's interpretation. Principal Vaughan's implementation was the most detailed. She was able to provide specific examples of what data should be considered, and she gave examples of how teachers should interpret student data. Using her experiences and knowledge in special education, she was systematic in how the possible retention letters were sent to students. Principal Mayo, on the other hand, was detailed in the information that she required from the teachers; however, teachers lacked guidance on the promotion policy and student data. Teachers lacked guidance because the principal did not clearly explain her interpretation of the policy. The policy implementation at Stonebridge Elementary was not as comprehensive as a result. Finally, Principal Clinton's implementation was shallow. Teachers were unsure of the principal's interpretation, and they did not have easy access to the principal. For this reason, the principal did not fully influence her teachers on her interpretation. The lack of influence in interpretation also created an atmosphere of distrust, which also makes implementation difficult.

Conclusion

Chapter 4, provided an analysis of participant interviews and documents. Knowledge, power, accountability, and experience each contributed to the principal's interpretation and implementation of policy. Experience, however, was the overarching factor that encompassed all other factors. Principals used these factors differently when interpreting the promotion policy for SWD. The principals used email, meetings, and personal conversations as the methods to influence their teachers on their interpretation of the policy. Email was the most widely used method; however, personal conversations were most effective. Finally, principal implementation of the district's promotion policy for SWD was most effective by those principals who clearly defined their interpretation of the policy to their teachers.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater knowledge of the contributing factors of a principal's interpretation and implementation of the school district's policies. This study especially analyzed the district's promotion policy for SWD. In addition to the factors, the study explored how principals influence their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the district's policy for SWD. The final aspect of the study examined how the principal implemented the district's promotion policy within their school. Interpretation of the district's policy varied between each school, which led to differences in implementation. This chapter will summarize the study, discuss the findings, and provide a conclusion of implications.

Summary of Study

In Chapter 1, I discussed the shift from social promotion to accountability; as a result, school divisions included accountability systems in their district promotion policies to ensure federal and state compliance. School districts must comply with IDEA and ensure FAPE for SWD. Therefore, the student's IEP may be considered in addition to the promotion policy. This study is significant because the retention of SWD directly affects the school and the district's dropout and graduation rates; and it has lasting effects on the SWD. Furthermore, varied principal interpretation and implementation of policy can impede the intent of the district's policy. District leadership and principals can use this study discuss better alignment between district policy with school-level interpretation and implementation. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors influence principal interpretation of promotion policies for students

with disabilities?

2. How do principals influence their teachers in understanding their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities?
3. How do principals implement their interpretation of the promotion policy for students with disabilities within their schools?

In Chapter 2, I provided a literature review of the existing literature surrounding this study. The literature review began with a review of accountability systems for students. Accountability systems in our education system began with the “A Nation At Risk” study under the Reagan administration and was continued with specific accountability guidelines for SWD under ESSA developed under the Obama administration. Federal and state regulations require SWD to participate in state and district-wide assessments, with appropriate accommodations and modifications as identified in their IEP (Yell et al., 2012). Chapter 2 also provided an overview of district policy interpretation and implementation. This section highlighted the need for clear policies, purpose, and policy outcome, so implementation is not undermined (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) and interpretation is consistent. District policy then focused on promotion policies for SWD focusing on Virginia’s promotion policy since this study takes place in the state of Virginia.

Finally, Chapter 2 concluded with a discussion of the Loosely Coupled Organizations and Street-level bureaucracy theoretical frameworks. The education system by definition is a loosely coupled organization due to the autonomy and innovation; however, the recent education reforms of accountability has begun a paradigm shift to a more tightened system (Shen, & Xia, 2017). Organizational structure is important in understanding principal interpretation and implementation. The Street-level bureaucracy theory explores policy interpretation and

implementation. Policy is developed at the upper levels, but it is carried out at the local or street-level (Lipsky, 1969). Street-level bureaucracy theory identifies three major factors that contribute to policy implementation and interpretation by street-level bureaucrats: the resources available, the challenge to authority, and the vague expectations (Lipsky, 1971). Ethics are intertwined in decision-making based on the implementer's values and beliefs.

In Chapter 3, I discussed my research design and methodology. Research was conducted in a Virginia school district. The study consisted of three elementary schools throughout the district. I interviewed the principal, assistant principal and the third grade Inclusion team consisting of the general education and special education teacher in each elementary school. In addition, I interviewed the Director of Special Education and the Director of Elementary Leadership. My data collection consisted of these interviews and document reviews. Public documents included enrollment, demographic, state accreditation, and the current promotion policy for elementary students from each school. Private documents that I obtained from district leadership included the previous district promotion policy with strikethrough changes, the district's retention meeting forms, student retention and rationale percentages per school, and the district's parental letter for possible retention. I completed data analysis using open coding, common theme development, and memoing. Finally, Chapter 4 reviewed the findings from the data analysis.

Discussion of Findings

The first section of Chapter 4 gave an overview of the case study's setting, and within-school and comparable school analysis. In this chapter, I will discuss the relationship between my findings and the literature review. This section will begin with a discussion of the principal's interpretation of the promotion policy for SWD through the lens of street-level bureaucracy

theory. Next, I will discuss the principal's implementation of the policy using loosely coupled organization theory. Finally, this chapter will conclude with implications for practice and further research.

The Principal's Interpretation of District Policy

The principal interpretation of the promotion policy for SWD involved the principal's knowledge, power, accountability, experience, and communication. As stated in Chapter 2, street-level bureaucrats are those front-line workers who interpret and implement policy. Street-level bureaucrats have a wide range of discretion because the interpretation and implementation of policy is a result of extreme judgement (Akosa & Asare, 2017). Figure 3 illustrates the principal's decision-making is comprised of the tenants of street-level bureaucracy theory and ethics. This study supported the three major factors that contribute to policy implementation and interpretation by street-level bureaucrats: the resources available, the challenge to authority, and the vague expectations (Lipsky, 1971).

Ethics in Decision Making



Figure 3: Ethics operates within street-level bureaucracy theory

Available Resources

Information is the available resource that can affect an organization positively or

negatively. The street-level bureaucrat needs information, time to process information, materials, and staff to mobilize the information for policy interpretation (Lipsky, 1969). In this study, knowledge was the available resource that influenced principal interpretation. The principal's and their teacher's depth of knowledge influenced their interpretation of the district's promotion policy for SWD. Street-level bureaucrats are far removed from the intent and development of the policy (Tummers, & Bekkers, 2014), they use the available resources they have to interpret the policy. Unfortunately, when policy is developed, leaders assume the implementers will have the resources they need (Bergen & White, 2004). District leadership assumed the principals had the knowledge and understanding to implement the policy. Principal's Mayo and Clinton did not have the adequate district or special education knowledge to interpret and implement the policy.

Knowledge was useful in decision-making; however, it was also the source of staff support. Staff confidence was rooted in the teachers and assistant principal's faith in the principal's knowledge. Lipsky (1969) explained that street-level bureaucrats mobilized others through available resources. Principals used their knowledge to create a comfortable environment for teachers and staff. The school environment that the principal's created were either open and supported or closed and distrustful. Staff members who were mobilized and comfortable with the principal's answers and guidance supported the environment the principal developed.

Forward mapping is top-down policy making that does not allow for input from policy implementers (Elmore, 2000). The district leaders used forward-mapping to develop the promotion policy, and the principals clearly did not have input in the policy. The study revealed that not all principals agreed with many components of the policy. In addition, the principals did

not understand the intent of the policy, so they instituted discretion in most of their decision-making (Thomann, 2015). Principals, as street-level bureaucrats, had discretionary freedom to follow or disregard guidance from district leadership. The principals took advantage of this depending on the situation.

Challenge to Authority

Power emboldens street-level bureaucrats and lessens their sense of threat and challenge to their authority (Lipsky, 1969). In this study, Principal Vaughan had the greatest degree of power and the lowest degree of threat. Her power was derived from the collaborative and supportive structure that she developed in her school (Taylor, 2007). As a result, her power yielded her a wide range of discretion. On the other hand, Principal Mayo was a “rule follower” and concerned with her accountability to district leadership. Furthermore, she depended on district leadership to provide support for her teachers. The teachers recognized this, and her power was diminished. She had greater challenge to her authority; thus, her discretion was minimal.

Meyers and Vorsanger (2007) explained that “hierarchical accountability structures” only slightly influence frontline workers. The staff at Oakbrook Elementary were not intimidated or challenged by the principal’s authority. Values and ethics are intertwined in decision-making (Loyens & Maesschalek, 2007) and challenge to the leaders authority. The principal’s attitudes on the best interest of the child and inclusion contributed to the principal’s decision-making and environment. These decisions can increase or decrease the support and challenge to authority from staff. Principal Clinton’s environment was not built on trust and support, so her staff were compelled to challenge to authority.

Moreover, the organizational structure of the schools influenced the degree of challenge

to authority. Schools with a strong hierarchical structure, such as Westpoint Elementary challenged their principal less. Westpoint Elementary had an assistant principal that was involved in decision-making, meetings, and she collaborated with the principal. The principal, also, included the teachers in decisions and empowered them with parents. On the other hand, Stonebridge Elementary had a principal who believed that her decisions were more important than her teachers. Principal Mayo not only resolved most parent issues herself, she also alienated the assistant principal and teachers in the process. Likewise, at Oakbrook Elementary, the assistant principal did not trust the principal. Principal Clinton chose to document conversations instead of include staff in decision-making. The relationships created by the organizational structure of these schools either enabled or disabled the principal's challenge to authority.

Vague Expectations

Vague or contradictory job expectations can impede the overarching expectations or change expectations in their roles (Lipsky, 1969). District leadership was not always consistent in guiding the principals. The inconsistency caused the principals to use their own discretion in policy interpretation and implementation. Principal discretion was used in determining how district forms were used, how information was transmitted, and if students were rationed or retained. Complex rules cause street-level bureaucrats to apply some rules and disregard others (Meyers & Nielson, 2012). This study was designed to review the district's promotion policy for SWD; however, in reviewing the policy, there were several vague components. In addition to the policy for SWD, I found the rationale policy was also an area of ambiguity. As a result, the disability or needs of the student was not always the area of contention. Principals chose to widely interpret any component of the policy based on the needs of their school or other factors

outlined in this study.

The Principal's Implementation of District Policy

The principal's implementation of the district's promotion policy was based on the thoroughness of the principal's interpretation of the policy and the influence on the teachers. Figure 4 displays district policy implementation as determined by the composition of the interpretation. District policy implementation is dependent upon the principal's knowledge, power, accountability, and experience. Implementation is contingent upon how effectively the principal uses these factors to communicate her interpretation of the policy to her teachers. The more knowledge, power, accountability, and experience the principal, the better interpretation and implementation will be.

Policy Interpretation to Implementation

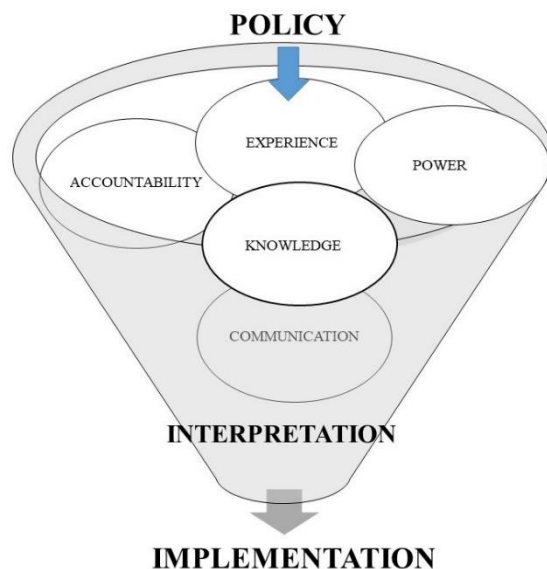


Figure 4: District policy interpretation is dependent upon the principal's knowledge, power, accountability, and experience. Implementation is the product of this interpretation

In addition, the design of the policy also affects the implementation. Forward mapping or a top-down process was used to develop the promotion policy for SWD researched in this study.

District leaders developed this policy and school board members approved it; however, teachers nor principals had input during policy development. The policy was designed to be an outline for promotion. However, the policy had unintended consequences with the unexplained concept of “rationale” and the vague language for SWD. A backward mapping or bottom-up process was not used; therefore, the policy was not focused on student outcomes and consequences (Elmore, 2000). Input from those implementing the policy could have prevented some of the unintended consequences. As a result, the implementers did not implement the policy with the policy intent in mind, nor did they take ownership over the policy.

School districts are generally loosely coupled organizations that practice under the idea that relationships are connected but maintain their own identity (Shen, & Xia, 2017; Weick, 1976). Tayden City School district has a centralized district structure; however, each department is loosely coupled. The study illustrated this concept as principals discussed their contradictory guidance from departments. In addition, the schools are loosely coupled within the district. Schools operate under the direction of district policy; however, principals have autonomy and discretion to interpret and implement policy. Each school develops their own policies and practices, and principals have the control to develop tightly coupled organizations within their schools. Tightly coupled organizations focus on authority and control (Hautala, Helander, & Korhonen, 2018).

Each part of a loosely coupled organization can function differently (Aurini, 2012), and this study indicates this concept. Stonebridge and Oakbrook Elementary schools were more tightly coupled than Westpoint Elementary. Principals who believe in greater accountability may have tighter coupled organizations. The degree of tension on the loosely coupled organizational spectrum depends on the principal’s available resources, challenge to authority, and vague

expectations. In turn, the use of available resources, challenge to authority, and vague expectations are dependent upon a tightly coupled or loosely coupled organization. As illustrated in Figure 5, street-level bureaucracy and loosely coupled organization theoretical frameworks operate in tandem.

Organizational Policy Interpretation and Implementation

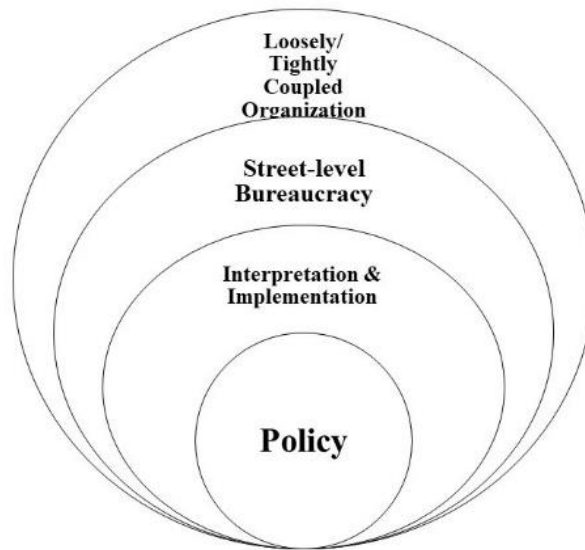


Figure 5: Policy interpretation and implementation is a product of street-level bureaucracy theory as it operates within the coupled organization.

Policy interpretation and implementation operates within the street-level bureaucracy framework; and street-level bureaucracy operates within an organizational structure that is tightly coupled or loosely coupled.

Conclusion

This study indicated that principals interpret district promotion policies for SWD based on their knowledge, power, accountability, and experience. Principals have discretion to interpret and implement policy within the context of their organizational structure. Successful policy implementation will depend on the strength of the policy interpretation. The principal's

interpretation will only be as successful as it is communicated; therefore, effective communication is crucial. Furthermore, the development of the policy (forward or backward mapping) and the structure of the organization (loosely or tightly coupled) will substantially determine the success of policy implementation.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study led to several implications for administrators and district leadership. Districts can ensure accountability and compliance by establishing clear organizational structures. The paradigm shift of accountability has forced school districts to create more tension in their loosely coupled organizational structures. School districts cannot expect high accountability measures for students through district policy without instituting accountability for their principals. Organizational structure is an important component of policy development, and districts would benefit from this consideration during policy development. A tighter coupling organizational structure is most compatible with accountability and accreditation standards required by the state and federal governments. Moreover, a tighter coupling organizational structure will ensure standards, expectations, and accountability for principals, students, and schools. In addition, if the school district determined which policies are non-negotiable and develop forward mapping or backward mapping as appropriate, the policy could be implemented as intended with fidelity. The district's vision and mission should guide these practices because it will strengthen the school's identity and stakeholder buy-in.

Statistics have shown that the number of SWD in the United States is steadily increasing, so school districts are responsible for taking a more active role in serving this population. Specific teaching strategies, specially designed instruction, regulations, and laws force school districts to place SWD in the forefront of all areas of education. In addition, the concentration on

academic outcomes, graduation rates, and dropout rates of SWD, creates a need for SWD to be infused in every conversation and policy involving student outcomes. Policy development that is specific to elevating the outcome of this growing and challenging subgroup will benefit the entire the district.

Principals and those who serve as local education agency (LEA) representatives do not have extensive special education knowledge or training. School districts have habitually trained principals as instructional leaders while foregoing the area of special education. Special education district leadership should not be responsible for educating all staff in the district. Furthermore, LEA education is vastly different from training teachers in pedagogy and instructional strategies. Principals require specific LEA knowledge in the many facets of Special Education law and regulations. An LEA has much responsibilities beyond instructing the SWD population; therefore LEA professional development should be mandated for principals and those serving as LEAs. If school districts developed regular systematic LEA training, principals could continuously be current on special education issues without relying on district leadership.

The growing SWD population, decreased SWD graduation, and increased SWD dropout rate is also an indicator that elementary principals need to be more involved in the implications of their retention decisions. This creates a need for stronger vertical planning and collaboration within districts. Many elementary principals are not aware of the long-term consequences of their retention decisions. Consequently, placement and assessment decisions in elementary school has a direct effect on graduation. Students assessed through an alternative assessment program and/or placed in a self-contained environment are not exposed to the rigor and standards of the standardized curriculum. These placement decisions can create a gap in the student's learning and a weak foundation of the basic skills needed to access the general curriculum.

Consistent collaborative planning and training with long-term goals will allow principals to foresee the consequences of their actions and make immediate modifications.

In addition to building the special education capacity of principals, teachers also need support in the area of special education. This study focused on principals, but the lack of special education knowledge by general education and special education teachers was also revealed. Teachers are the immediate street-level bureaucrats and implementers of policy. Therefore, teachers must be knowledgeable of special education instruction and policy in order to adequately serve their students. School districts should offer on-going professional development for general education teachers, as well, as special education teachers. The growing number of SWD in Inclusion classes means that general education teachers are more involved in the education of SWD.

District mandated professional development and policymakers often assume that policy implementers understand the policy and its intent; thus discounting varied interpretations and biases (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This study revealed the varied interpretations of district policy when the policy intent is not clear. District leaders should take the time to meet with principals and explain the intent of the policy when new policies are being considered. An alternative to this would be to develop policies directly related to students through a backward mapping method. This would give principals the opportunity to be involved in the policy intent.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study suggests future research is needed in determining how principals interpret and implement district policy. This study had limitations due to the timing of the research within the school year. The research took place December through March of the school year. If the study took place during the entirety of the school year, the researcher could

have monitored the validity of the influences on the interpretation of policy. In addition, if the study extended to the end of the school year, the researcher could have studied the implementation of the district's promotion policy. Moreover, a longitudinal study across multiple school years will allow the researcher the opportunity to track student data, progress, and principal interpretation/implementation over years. Tracking could ensure the factors that contribute to the principal's interpretation, the influence on teachers, and policy implementation are valid. Research could also be extended to explore the effect of organizational structures on the principal's interpretation and implementation. Schools could be chosen based on their dimension of looseness on the loosely coupled organizational paradigm to determine the relationship with interpretation and implementation of district policy. Finally, this research could also be combined with an analysis of forward and backward mapping.

Summary

My study gives insight into principal interpretation and implementation of district policy. Throughout the study, knowledge, power, accountability, and experience are highlighted as factors that influence principal interpretation of district policy. These factors are also reflected in how the principal influenced teachers in their interpretation and implementation of the district policy. The study focused on the district's promotion policy for students with disabilities in the third grade, however, it can be translated to other district policies across the school district.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Document Old Dominion University

Research Project Title: District Promotion Policies for Students with Disabilities: Examining Principal Interpretation and Implementation

Purposes of this form: The purposes of this form are to provide information that will assist in your decision on whether to consent (YES) or not consent (NO) in participating in this research, and to document the consent of those who participate. The research project is entitled District Promotion Policies for Students with Disabilities: Examining Principal Interpretation and Implementation. The research will be conducted at the school or building where the participant is assigned. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

Researcher:

LaToya Exum Floyd M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership
Old Dominion University
Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership

Description of Research Study: Many researchers have explored the impact of accountability policies on students with disabilities and how these policies have impacted the promotion of students with disabilities. However, there is a gap in the literature in regards to how these policies are interpreted at the school level. District promotion policies are generally unclear and do not include specific considerations for students with disabilities. As a result, principals must interpret the policy for students with disabilities without clear guidelines. Moreover, each school within the district has differing cultures, values, and missions that may affect the principal's interpretation and implementation of the district's promotion policy.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you offer a unique perspective of district's promotion policy and/or principal interpretation and implementation of policy at the school level. If you decide to participate, you will join a study involving research on how a principal interprets and implements the district's promotion policy for student with disabilities.

Purpose of this Research Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between principals' beliefs and how the principal interprets and implements district policies within the school setting. This study will specifically focus on the impact of district promotion policies on students with disabilities.

Participation in the Research Study: If you agree to participate in this study, you will complete an interview. The interview will include questions about the district's promotion policy, the impact of Virginia's accountability system on students with disabilities, the

principal's role in shaping beliefs about students with disabilities in the school, and the relationship between the principal and teachers regarding promotion/retention for students with disabilities. During the interview, we will explore some of these topics deeper depending on your background and areas of expertise. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to complete; and I would like to tape-record the interview with your permission.

In addition to the interview, the researcher will observe promotion/retention meetings at the school level. The purpose of these observations will be to observe the conversation and interaction between the teachers of students with disabilities and the principal. I would like to tape-record the promotion/retention meetings with your permission.

Risks and benefits:

There is the risk that you may find some of the questions about specific practices or beliefs related to students with disabilities sensitive; therefore, please share only what you are comfortable with sharing.

If you decide to participate in this study, there is no risk to your job or position within in the school or school division. Any information obtained during the course of the interview and/or observation that may lead your identity will not be shared with any person that supervises you.

There are no benefits to you. The researcher hopes to learn more about principal interpretation and implementation of policy regarding students with disabilities in order to develop an understanding of policy interpretation, implementation, and decision-making at the school level where students are most affected by district policy.

Compensation: Your participation is voluntary and the researcher will not compensate you for participating in this study.

New information: If the researcher obtains new information during the course of this study that would reasonably change your decision regarding participation, then the researcher will give it to you.

Confidentiality: All information obtained about you in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations and publications, but the researcher will not identify you. The records of this study and all facts about you will be kept private. Data will be kept on a secured server that only the researchers have access to and the material, analysis, and writings will be kept there until we are able to destroy it as per the policy.

Withdrawal privilege: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to participate, you may choose not to answer any particular question asked; or you may choose not to participate in any meeting that I observe. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw

at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University or the school division.

Voluntary consent: By signing this form, you are stating that you have read this form or had it read to you; you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. You are also stating that the researcher has answered any questions you may have had about the research.

If you have any questions at any time, you can contact the researcher:
LaToya Exum Floyd, lfloy001@odu.edu, (757) 237-7982

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. Petros Katsioloudis, the current IRB chair, at 757-683-5323, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757-683-3460.

By signing below, you are telling the researcher “YES, I DO CONSENT” and agree to participate in this study.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____
Your Name (printed) _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

I am a Doctoral Candidate with Old Dominion University, and I have been granted approval to conduct research with Suffolk Public Schools. My research will require interviewing participants in three elementary schools. These interviews will be a part of a study examining the relationship between the principals' beliefs and how he/she interprets and implements district policies within the school setting. This study will specifically focus on the impact of district promotion policies on students with disabilities.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you offer a unique perspective of the district's promotion policy and/or principal interpretation and implementation of policy at the school level. If you decide to participate, you will join a study for a research project entitled District Promotion Policies for Students with Disabilities: Examining Principal Interpretation and Implementation.

Please see the attached documents concerning this research study. The attachments include an Informed Consent regarding the study, a Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement, and a letter from Suffolk Public Schools approving this study. Please read each of these documents carefully. If you choose to participate in this study, please sign and return the Informed Consent and the Conflict of Interest statement to me via email. If I obtain your consent, I will contact you to schedule a time that we can meet for the initial interview.

In order to determine if I have the necessary participants at each elementary school, please email me if you do or do not wish to participate. I would appreciate an email even if you are not able to sign your consent forms at this time (I am trying to determine site participation). Your decision to participate will not impact you professionally.

If you have any questions regarding this research study, the process, or the attachments, feel free to email me or call me at .

Thank you

APPENDIX C

Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

The researcher, LaToya Exum Floyd, is employed by the school district studied; however, the researcher does not have any interest in the outcome of the study.

The researcher, LaToya Exum Floyd, holds the title of Supervisor of Instruction for Special Education within the school district studied. All research, interviews, observations, and data collection will be used for the sole purpose of the Dissertation entitled “*District Promotion Policies for Students with Disabilities: Examining Principal Interpretation and Implementation*”. Information and data gathered will not be used in the researcher’s employment capacity. Any participants engaged in this study will have their name withheld. Names will be replaced with pseudonyms throughout the process of data analysis and all written research. Any audio recordings will be permanently deleted after being transcribed. Characteristics of individual schools will be removed in order to conceal the identity of districts, schools, leaders, and staff.

This statement is signed by the researcher to indicate that the above information is true and distributed to participants of the study.

LaToya Exum Floyd
Researcher’s name

Researcher's signature

Date

Participant’s name

Participant’s signature

Date

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

*All questions related to students with disabilities are in reference to students with disabilities who are assessed by the SOLs not the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program.

Director of Educational Leadership Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in the school district and what roles have you had in the district?
2. Explain the District's Promotion Policy for elementary students.
3. How long has the current District's Promotion Policy been in effect?
4. Explain the role SOLs, district-wide assessments, grades, and attendance plays in the District's promotion policy.
5. What is the process that elementary schools go through to determine which students will be promoted and which students will be retained?
6. Does the District's Promotion Policy differ for students with disabilities? If so, explain.
7. Discuss the difference between "promoted" and "rationale"?
8. Do the schools have any guidance on how to determine who will be "promoted" versus who will be "retained"?
9. What type of student is "rationaled" and how is the "rationaled" status determined?
10. What role do principals play in the promotion and retention of elementary students?
11. Does the principal's role differ with students with disabilities? If so, explain.
12. How much flexibility do principals have in determining promotion and retention elementary students?
13. Are principal's given more or less flexibility in determining the promotion and retention for students with disabilities? Explain.
14. Discuss Promotion/Retention meetings. What is the purpose? When do they take place? And what is the role of the principal and teacher during these meetings?

Director of Special Education Interview Questions

1. Explain the education program of a student who is not being assessed by an alternate assessment program.
2. What type of guidance (if any) is given to principals and/or teachers regarding this type of education program (Inclusion or General Education)?
3. Explain the impact a student with disabilities' IEP has on promotion and retention.
4. What does IDEA and/or VDOE regulations state about promotion and retention for students with disabilities?
5. Explain the District's Promotion Policy for elementary students.
6. Does the District's Promotion Policy differ for students with disabilities? If so, explain.
7. Discuss the difference between "promoted" and "rationale"?
8. What type of student is "rationaled" and how is the "rationale" status determined?
9. What role do principals play in the promotion and retention of elementary students with disabilities?

10. How much flexibility do principals have in determining promotion and retention elementary students with disabilities?
11. What role does the Special Education Department play in promotion and retention for elementary students?
12. What type of guidance (if any) is given to principals and/or teachers regarding the promotion and retention of students with disabilities?

Principal Interview Questions

1. Explain the attitudes toward inclusion in your school.
2. What role do you play in shaping the attitudes toward inclusion?
3. What guidance do you get from the district level regarding inclusion and students with disabilities?
4. Explain the District's Promotion Policy for elementary students.
5. Explain the role SOLs, district-wide assessments, grades, and attendance plays in the District's promotion policy.
6. Does the District's Promotion Policy differ for students with disabilities? If so, explain.
7. What guidance do you get from the district level regarding promotion and retention for students with disabilities?
8. How do you ensure teachers understand this policy?
9. Discuss the difference between "promoted" and "rationale"?
10. What type of student is "rationaled" and how is the "rationale" status determined?
11. What role do you play in the promotion and retention of elementary students?
12. Does your role differ with students with disabilities? If so, explain.
13. How much flexibility do you have in determining promotion and retention elementary students?
14. Are you given more or less flexibility in determining the promotion and retention for students with disabilities? Explain.
15. Discuss Promotion/Retention meetings. What is the purpose? When do they take place? And what is your role and the teacher during these meetings?
16. How comfortable are you with the clarity of the district's promotion/retention policy for students with disabilities? Explain.
17. How comfortable are you with interpreting and implementing the district's promotion policy for students with disabilities in your school? Explain.

LEA (Assistant Principal) Interview Questions

1. Explain the attitudes toward inclusion in your school.
2. What role does your principal play in shaping the attitudes toward inclusion?
3. What guidance do you get from your principal regarding inclusion and students with disabilities?
4. Explain the District's Promotion Policy for elementary students.
5. Explain the role SOLs, district-wide assessments, grades, and attendance plays in the District's promotion policy.
6. Does the District's Promotion Policy differ for students with disabilities? If so, explain.

7. What guidance do you get from your principal regarding promotion and retention for students with disabilities?
8. How does your principal ensure teachers understand this policy?
9. Discuss the difference between “promoted” and “rationale”?
10. What type of student is “rationaled” and how is the “rationale” status determined?
11. What role does your principal play in the promotion and retention of students with disabilities?
12. How comfortable are you with the clarity of the district’s promotion/retention policy for students with disabilities? Explain.
13. How comfortable are you with how your principal interprets and implements the district’s promotion policy for students with disabilities in your school? Explain.

3rd Grade General Education Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in the division and what roles have you held?
2. Explain the District’s promotion policy for elementary students.
3. Does the District’s Promotion Policy differ for students with disabilities? If so, explain.
4. What role does the student’s IEP play in the promotion/retention decision? How is this determined? Who determines this?
5. How does your principal ensure teachers understand this policy?
6. What role does the teacher play in determining promotion of students with disabilities at your school?
7. What is the difference between “promoted” and “rationaled”?
8. Who makes the final decision on promotion, retention, and rationale?
9. What guidance or direction does your principal give you in making decisions on promoting students with disabilities?
10. How comfortable are you with the clarity of the district’s promotion/retention policy for students with disabilities? Explain.
11. How comfortable are you with how your principal interprets and implements the district’s promotion policy for students with disabilities in your school? Explain.
12. Explain the attitudes toward inclusion in your school.
13. What role does your principal play in shaping the attitudes toward inclusion?
14. How does the co-teaching model of Inclusion work in your classroom environment?
15. Explain what you do for students with disabilities who are not achieving academically. What does “not achieving academically” mean to you and/or your school?
16. Does your principal get involved with the academic achievement of your students with disabilities? If so, explain?

3rd Grade Special Education Teacher Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in the division and what roles have you held?
2. Explain the District’s promotion policy for elementary students.
3. Does the District’s Promotion Policy differ for students with disabilities? If so, explain.
4. How does your principal ensure teachers understand this policy?

5. What role does the special education teacher play in determining promotion of students with disabilities at your school?
6. What is the difference between “promoted” and “rationaled”?
7. What type of student is “rationaled”?
8. Who makes the final decision on promotion, retention, and rationale?
9. What role does the IEP and the IEP Team play in promotion and retention?
10. What guidance or direction does your principal give you in making decisions on promoting students with disabilities?
11. Who determines IEP progress for a student?
12. How comfortable are you with the clarity of the district’s promotion/retention policy for students with disabilities? Explain.
13. How comfortable are you with how your principal interprets and implements the district’s promotion policy for students with disabilities in your school? Explain.
14. Explain the attitudes toward inclusion in your school.
15. What role does your principal play in shaping the attitudes toward inclusion?
16. How does the co-teaching model of Inclusion work in your classroom environment?
17. Explain what you do for students with disabilities who are not achieving academically. What does “not achieving academically,” mean to you and/or your school?
18. Does your principal get involved with the academic achievement of your students with disabilities? If so, explain?

3rd Grade Co-teaching Team post Promotion/Retention meeting Follow-up Interview Questions

1. What is the purpose of the Promotion/Retention meetings?
2. Who was a part of the meeting?
3. What is the role of the principal during the Promotion/Retention meetings?
4. What is your role during these meetings?
5. How many students with disabilities did the group discuss in the meeting?
6. Explain the academic achievement of each of the student with disabilities.
7. What was your concern with each of these students?
8. What type of questions did your principal ask regarding the students and/or their academic performance?
9. What recommendations were made for each of the students?
10. How is the principal planning to follow-up on the recommendations?
11. How comfortable are you with the clarity of the district’s promotion/retention policy for students with disabilities? Explain.
12. How comfortable are you with how your principal interprets and implements the district’s promotion policy for students with disabilities in your school? Explain.

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